CHINA REPORT

Volume No. 144 May 2025

FEATURE

Sea and Change: South China's fishers face uncertain tides

CULTURE

Anchored in Faith: Mazu ceremony unites believers across borders

THINKING IN TANDEM

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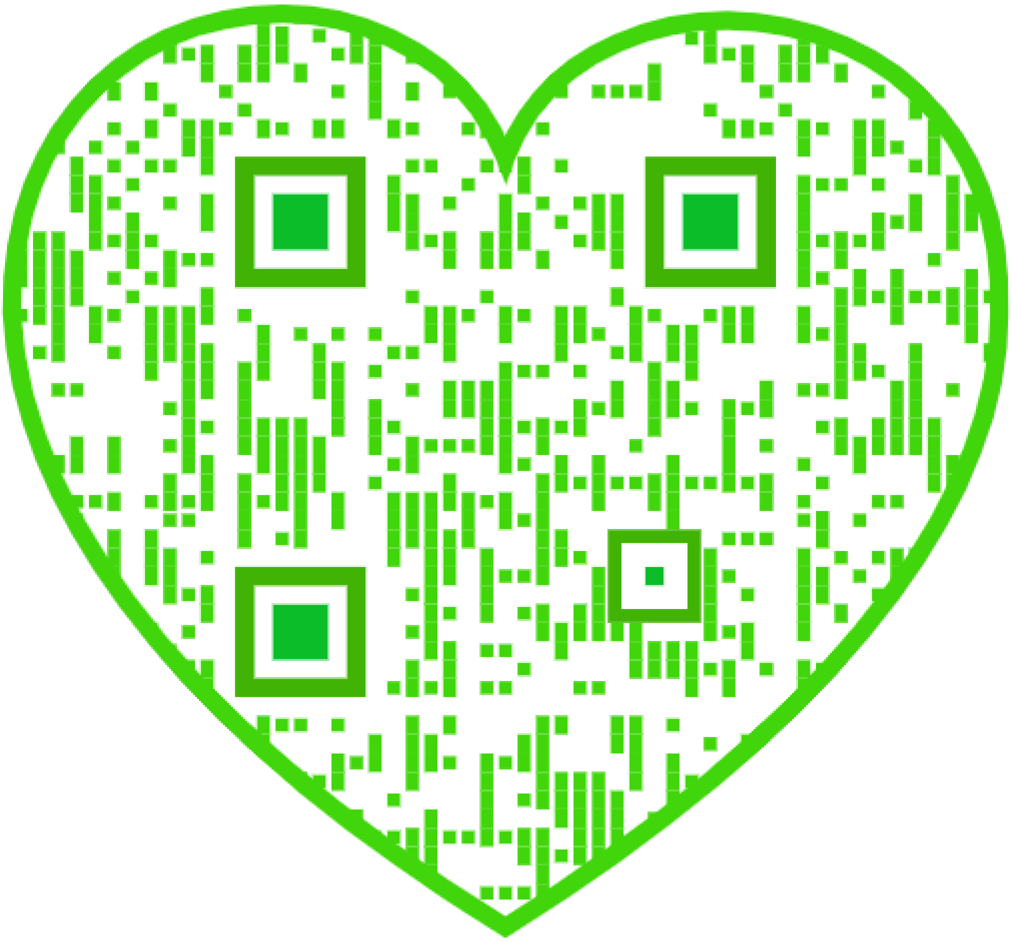

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World Tourism Organization

Around the world tourism grows every single year. Tourism creates job opportunities, empowers communities and improves livelihoods.

Tourism is part of the economic value chain, from infrastructure and communication to food production and transport.

Tourism goes far beyond tourism alone! Delivering on its huge potential is the task of the **World Tourism Organization (UNWTO),** the UN's special agency to promote tourism's many benefits on societies and the economy.

unwto.org

China must strengthen its economic resilience to address challenges from the escalating trade war

Since the Trump administration launched its "Liberation Day" tariffs on April 2, investors, traders and consumers, including those in the US, have experienced shock waves from the financial, commodities and gold markets. Major international institutions have lowered their growth forecasts for the 2025 world economy.

The pressure weighs on China as the world's second-largest economy and one of the top partners of two-way trade and investment with the US, and in particular, as the main target of the staggering tariffs.

China is clearly aware that the key to deal with the challenge is to consolidate its own economic position. It has already taken measures to stabilise market expectations. In response to the recent volatility in the stock market, major State investors, notably Central Huijin Investment, announced it has increased holdings of China's stock market shares. The People's Bank of China (PBoC), China's central bank, also stated it stands ready to provide ample relending support to Central Huijin when necessary, laying the institutional groundwork for a full-scale stabilisation fund. With structural upgrades across industries, enhanced innovation-driven growth, ample market liquidity and improved listed company quality, China's stock market increasingly appeals to international investors.

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Moreover, China's monetary and fiscal policies as well as financial tools have become more sophisticated and mature. The central bank has refined its ability to manage liquidity through targeted rate adjustments and reserve requirement ratio tweaks. Fiscal policy has grown more agile, with expanded bond issues for critical infrastructure and green-energy projects.

More importantly, China will continue to tackle its challenges at home. Weak domestic demand has been a stubborn drag on growth. With the recent stimulus package, there are signs that domestic demand is on the rise. Official data showed that total retail sales of consumer goods in the first two months of 2025 grew by 4 percent, 0.5 percentage points higher than the same period last year. There is more potential to further unlock household spending by strengthening wage growth mechanisms, stabilising the property market and expanding social safety nets.

In addition, amid weakening external demand, China can recalibrate its fiscal expenditure structure by increasing investments in innovation-driven sectors, such as R&D, education and healthcare, while encouraging private capital participation in social welfare projects to alleviate fiscal burdens. There are a lot of investment opportunities in infrastructure projects with long-term economic dividends like transportation networks, clean energy systems and digital infrastructure, while avoiding sectors already at overcapacity and low-return, short-gestation projects.

With a more consolidated domestic economy, China should strengthen ties with major trade partners such as the EU and ASEAN, positioning itself as a stabilising force and demonstrating that its market remains open and its commitment to multilateral cooperation is unwavering. The trade war is not a bilateral one for any economy. As the restructuring of world trade landscape and international supply chains is inevitable, it is a critical time for China to strengthen its economic position and cooperation with other economies to secure sustained growth of the world economy.★

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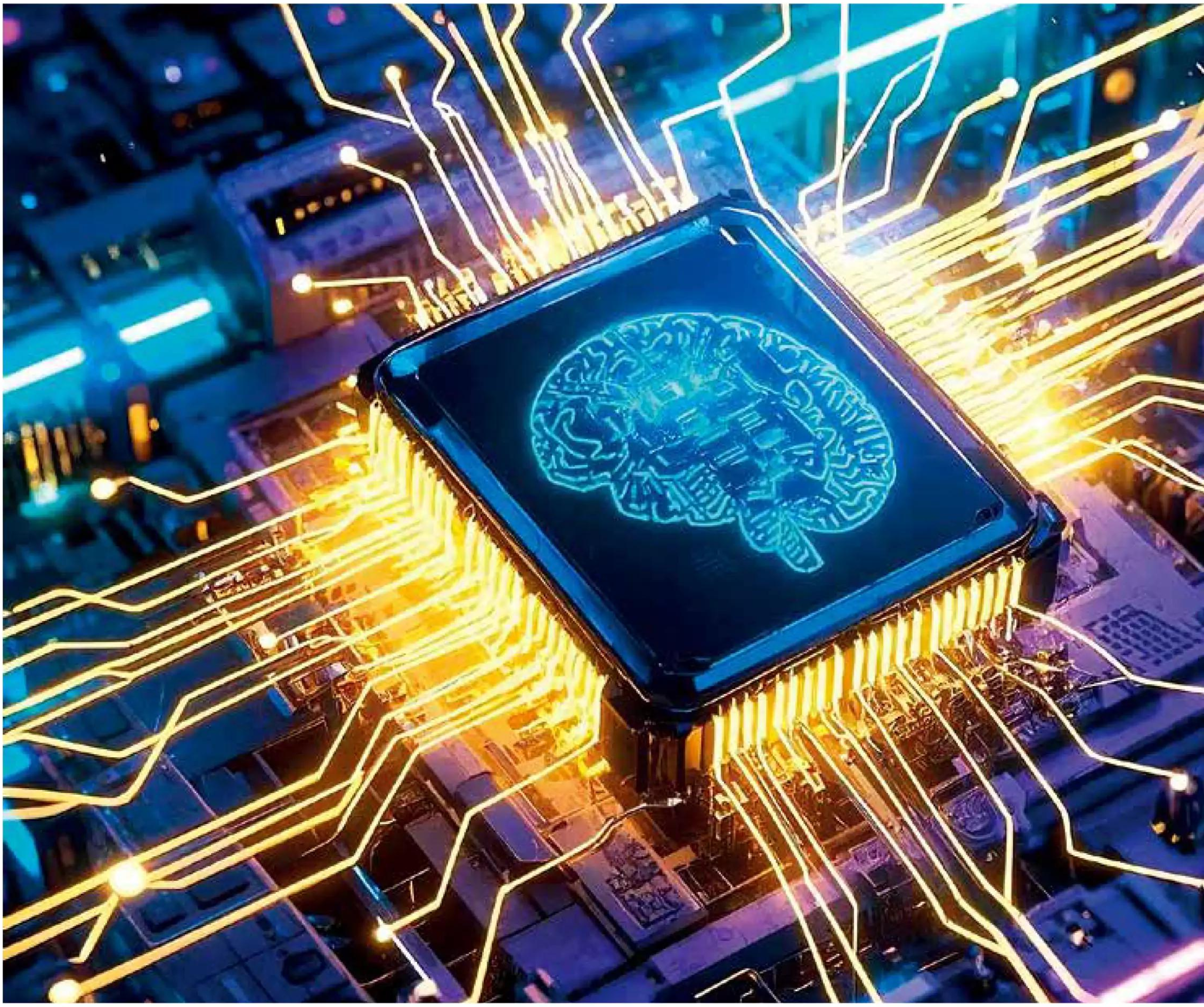

Brain Boxes

Robots are doing paperwork. Algorithms are making diagnoses. As AI goes mainstream, *ChinaReport* looks at what's working – and what needs fixing

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机器人半程马拉松
ROBOT HALF-MARATHON
第一名 NO.1

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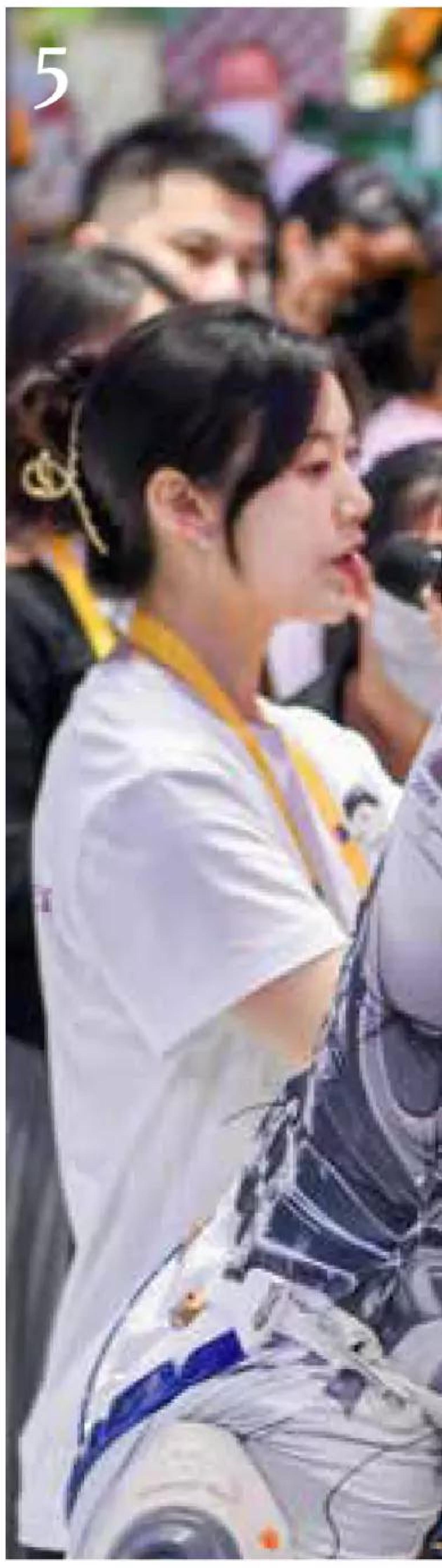

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1. Locals and tourists take part in the Water-Splashing Festival in a square in Jinghong City, Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, April 14, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

2. Tourists and locals splash water on each other to celebrate the Water-Splashing Festival, Mang City, capital city of Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, April 12, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

3. A man wearing traditional costume participates in a parade to celebrate the beginning of the Water-Splashing Festival in Mang City, Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, April 12, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

4. Tiangong Ultra, developed by the Beijing Humanoid Robot Innovation Centre, crosses the finish line of the world's first humanoid robot half marathon, Beijing, April 19, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

5. A woman performs as a robot at the China International Consumer Products Expo, Haikou, Hainan Province, April 15, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

1. People view cherry blossoms in Ma'anchi Park, Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, April 7, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

2. A visitor takes a photo in front of a sculpture of the legendary Sun Wukong as he apperas in the blockbuster online game *Black Myth: Wukong* at an exhibition held by the China Academy of Art to celebrate the school's 97th anniversary, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, April 9, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

3. A cat lies beside a boarding pass for pets at Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport, April 14, 2025. The airport is piloting a new terminal that provides services including quarantine, boarding and booking pet-friendly hotels to travellers with pets (Photo by VCG)

4. A red panda plays on a climbing frame decorated with flowers at Leheledu Animal Theme Park, Chongqing, March 21, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

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Ancient Whispers Beneath Wood and Rocks

China Newsweek March 31, 2025

From the majestic structures of the Tang and Liao dynasties (681-1125) to the delicate designs of the Song and Yuan dynasties (960-1368), existing examples of China's traditional architecture are living fossils. Though only a few ancient temples from more than 800 years ago have survived, scrutinising their designs carries immense research value, including the cap-and-block *dougong* brackets connecting beams and columns without nails, all with different shapes according to different dynasties. Other elements include the wooden ornaments carved in Sanskrit that adorn windows and how the gaze of a Buddhist Guanyin sculpture aligns precisely with an opposite pagoda. Since the 1930s, generations of Chinese architects trekked around rural China to discover remaining ancient architecture, among which are the Tang-era Foguang Temple in Xinzhou, Shanxi Province, the Liao-era Dule Temple in Tianjin and the Song-era Kaihua Temple in Shanxi. According to architect Liang Sicheng (1901-1972), ancient Chinese preferred building with wood, believing in the natural process of decay and rebirth.

The Decline and Renewal of Liberal Arts

Xinmin Weekly April 2, 2025

Universities in China have been slashing certain majors, including Chinese, advertising and education in liberal arts due to shrinking admissions, low employment rates and impractical course designs. While most students head to STEM disciplines to meet the country's development strategies by studying chips, AI and quantum theory, those who believe in humanity's irreplaceable roles suggest the need for interdisciplinary studies such as AI ethics to integrate liberal arts into sciences. Some argue that while subjects like journalism and foreign languages decline, disciplines such as philosophy and literature that can cultivate critical thinking and compassion should be learned over a lifetime. Experts advocate for less restrictive liberal arts studies, saying that rote memorisation runs counter to its true values.

Healthy Beverages and Discount Supermarkets

South Reviews April 7, 2025

In line with Shanghai's regulations on personal hygiene and health issued two years ago, beverages in the city are classed into four categories based on their health indexes. For instance, a jasmine milk tea made by popular beverage brand Chagee is graded B, or moderately healthy. In response to growing health concerns, HeyTea, one of the largest beverage chain stores, has classified its products according to caffeine concentrations. Vegetable drinks are emerging to cater for consumers who like green foods. In addition to healthy beverages, cheap supermarkets are attracting young consumers. To meet their expectations at lower prices, supermarkets like Zhao Yiming Snack and Aldi are selling low-cost and own-brand products. Amid fierce competition, experts believe only those that precisely target consumer demands with the help of AI forecasts and analyses will eventually win out.

Foreign Investments Adapt to New Development

China Economic Weekly
March 30, 2025

Despite the actual utilised foreign investment falling by 27.1 percent year-on-year to less than 827 billion yuan (US$113b) in 2024, China remains attractive to foreign investors in the long run. New foreign investments are largely concentrated in AI, and green and digital industries have grown for consecutive years. Last year saw 59,080 foreign companies, mostly in high-tech and tertiary industries, launch divisions in China, a 9.9-percent rise year-on-year. Based on the latest negative list issued in November 2024, foreign manufacturers of new energy vehicles, integrated circuits, precision equipment and biological and pharmaceutical productions can for the first time have the same market access as Chinese firms. Unlike the past when China was eager for foreign capital, now foreign investors are being encouraged to help more Chinese enterprises go abroad. Economists believe this reciprocity can safeguard future economic security.

Chinese Villages Pave the Way for Zero Carbon Development

China Sustainability Tribune
March 1, 2025

To replace straw and coal burning with photovoltaic-storage-direct-flexibility (PSDF), electrification and clean biomass conversion technologies, Chinese villages are gearing up for zero-carbon construction as the country aims for its dual carbon goals. Key indicators for a zero-carbon village incorporate assessments of its energy-saving efforts, pollutant emission controls, how affluent villagers' lifestyles are and eco-friendly environments. As a voluntarily determined goal based on different situations in different villages, it requires well-designed planning and regular data-based supervision. However, zero-carbon achievements will not be accredited to villages that build large solar power plants yet still burn combustion fuels. According to professor Yang Xudong from Tsinghua University, the zero-carbon campaign in rural China is not compulsory, so local governments can implement it gradually without adopting one-size-fits-all approaches.

"Key environmental factors in a student's development, from school to family and peers, all influence their reliance on mobile phones. When students are under psychological pressure, lack emotional support or feel insecure, they tend to overuse phones to make up for what's missing in real life. Phones become both a comfort and a shield against loneliness. If educators focus only on restricting phone use and neglect students' mental well-being, strict controls may in fact trigger new psychological issues."

Liu Hong, associate researcher at the Fudan Development Institute, writing in *China Education News*, a newspaper under the Ministry of Education, on April 7

"We can eliminate various exam subjects, but we cannot eliminate social competition. The intense competition for the *zhongkao* (high-school entrance exam) and *gaokao* (national college entrance exam) is essentially a prelude to broader social competition. As long as society remains fiercely competitive, the education system will inevitably reflect that."

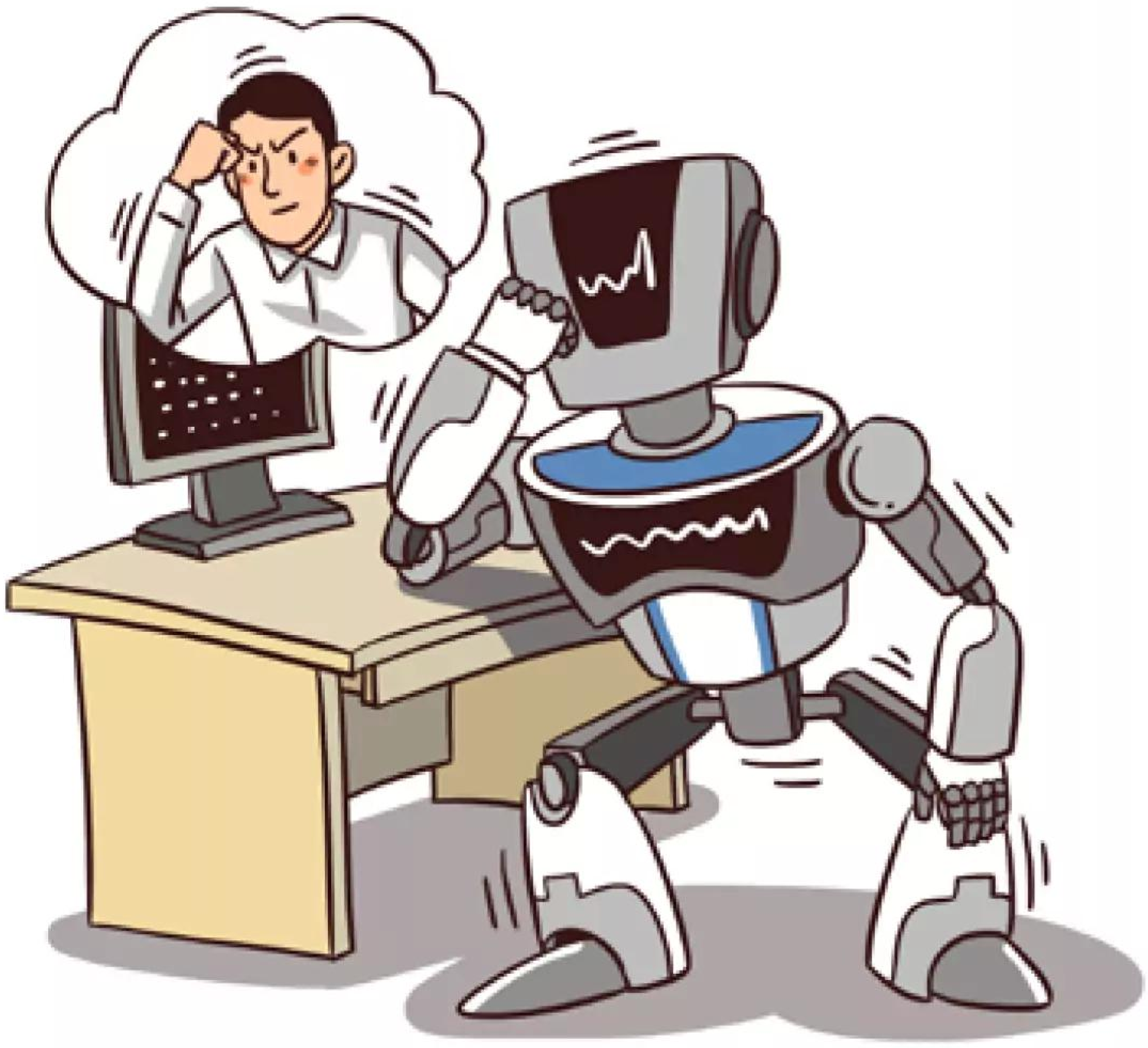
Chen Zhiwen, editor-in-chief of eol.cn, China's largest education portal, commenting on Beijing's move to remove chemistry, physics, geography and biology from the *zhongkao*, in a March interview with news outlet Caixin

"The first stage of the competition in the new energy vehicle industry focused on electrification, an improvement on traditional cars. But the second stage, centred on integrating smart functions, is disruptive and moving much faster, perhaps in just two to three years. In the past, we measured progress by EV penetration. From this year on, we must look to advanced intelligent driving to push the industry's high-quality development."

Wang Chuanfu, chairman and CEO of BYD, a leading Chinese electric vehicle maker, at the China EV100 Forum 2025 held in Beijing from March 28 to 30

"The knowledge, business models and algorithms we've developed should not be used to exploit society's most vulnerable. Our profits, market value and wealth should never come at the cost of grassroots workers living without basic protections."

Liu Qiangdong, founder of JD.com, calling on companies to provide all couriers and delivery riders with full social insurance and housing fund coverage, as required by China's labour laws, in a WeChat post on March 21



"We're not aiming to make machines human, but to make them understand humans, think like humans and do things humans cannot... AI should not replace us, but free us, better understand us and serve us well."

Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba, speaking at Alibaba Cloud's annual fiscal year kickoff meeting in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province on April 10

"Sound economic development and innovative startups need a market where individuals have the freedom to make choices and start businesses. At the same time, the government must effectively protect entrepreneurs' rights, provide incentives, reduce market uncertainty and support innovation and entrepreneurship through sound policies."

Zhang Jun, dean of the School of Economics at Fudan University in Shanghai, arguing in a recent interview with news portal guancha.cn that the market and the government should not be seen as separate, but essential parts of the same system

"It's good that people have money to buy more bread, but subsidies alone don't address their real challenges: education, healthcare, housing, social insurance and pensions. Boosting consumption isn't just about handing out money, it's about tackling why people are afraid or unable to spend."

Liu Shijin, former deputy director of the Development Research Centre of the State Council, at the China Development Forum 2025 held in Beijing from March 23 to 24

"Equating a betrothal gift with sexual consent essentially reduces women to tradable objects. We must not trivialise a case of sexual violence by framing it as a crude relationship dispute."

Guancha.cn commenting on a recent case in Shanxi Province, where a man was sentenced to three years in prison for forcing his fiancée to have sex after giving her a betrothal gift. The man has appealed and the higher court has kept the original judgement

Trade War Adds Unprecedented Uncertainty to World Growth and Order

Since returning to the White House in January, US President Donald Trump has reignited and intensified trade conflicts with its major trade partners. Trump started with ordering 25 percent tariffs on goods from Mexico and Canada on February 1, pausing the tariffs two days later. In the meantime, Trump also imposed 20 percent additional tariffs on goods from China, which China responded with various countermeasures.

On March 26, the US imposed tariffs up to 25 percent on imports of vehicles and car parts, which analysts predict will deal a huge blow to automobile industries of its major allies, including the European Union, Japan and South Korea.

On April 2, Trump stunned the world by unveiling "Liberation Day" tariffs targeting nearly all trade partners. The two-tier tariffs include a 10 percent "baseline" tariff on imports from all countries, except Canada and Mexico, and higher country-specific "reciprocal" tariffs targeting about 60 nations, including China, which was subject to a 34 percent rate hike, set to take effect on April 9. Trump also threatened to hike tariffs further for any country who dare to retaliate.

The tariffs immediately unsettled markets domestically and internationally, as investors feared escalating trade wars would disrupt supply chains and dampen economic growth. On April 4, China announced imposing a reciprocal 34 percent tariff on all US goods. China also added 16 US companies to its export control list and 11 US companies on its unreliability list, and imposed export control measures on products of seven rare earth elements and magnets – materials vital to defence, energy, and automobile industries.

China's swift countermeasures prompted further escalation from the Trump administration, which increased its tariff on Chinese imports for another 50 percentage points, bringing the final rate to 104 percent. China responded in kind, raising its retaliatory tariffs to 84 percent on the same day.

On April 10, in a dramatic policy reversal, Trump announced a 90-day pause on country-specific tariffs, citing an alleged cooperative response from its 75 trading partners, while the 10 percent "baseline" tariff came into effect. However, China was not only excluded from the tariff pause, but Trump declared to hike tariff on Chinese imports to 125 percent, which is on top of the 20 percent rate previously imposed on China, bringing the total tariff to 145 percent.

That same day, China mirrored the US's escalation by raising its additional tariffs on US goods to 125 percent. China stated that it would ignore any further tariff hikes on Chinese goods and stop playing Trump's "tariff numbers game,"given that the US exports to China are "commercially unviable" under current tariff levels.

On April 15, the White House released a fact sheet stating that some imports from China would face up to 245 percent tariffs, which includes a 125 percent "reciprocal" tariff, a 20 percent tariff for fentanyl crisis, and tariffs between 7.5 percent and 100 percent on some goods under Section 301.

While Trump had suggested repetitively that he is open for negotiation, he insisted that China needs to make the first move. But so far, China has made it clear that it will not yield on Trump pressure, and the Ministry of Commerce has maintained working-level communication with its US counterpart. On April 9, China released a white paper on bilateral trade relations with the US, criticising that the US trade restriction measures are "in conflict with the principles of the market economy, run counter to multilateralism." China has already filed a lawsuit against the US with the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) dispute settlement mechanism.

Meanwhile, there is no sign that the US could reach a deal with other major countries that have sought to negotiate with the US any time soon. The EU had earlier proposed a "zero-for-zero" tariff agreement, which Trump explicitly rejected on April 8. The EU later metred out its retaliatory 25 percent tariffs on US goods, only to suspend them after Trump's decision to pause country-specific tariffs.

On April 14, Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba said that his country does not plan to make big concessions and will not rush to reach a deal in upcoming tariff negotiations with the US.

As it is not clear when and how the US's historical tariff war will end, the global economy faces mounting risks of recession, supply chain disruptions, and prolonged market instability. As the trade war escalates, the market is increasingly worried about both imminent and potential long-term damage to global economic prospect and order.

Xi Pledges to Build a 'Community with a Shared Future' During Southeast Asia Trip

Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and Chinese President, paid a State visit to neighbouring Vietnam, Malaysia and Cambodia from April 14 to 18, emphasising the idea of "a community with shared future" with the three nations.

In the joint statement on April 15 on accelerating the building of a community with a shared future that carries strategic significance, China and Vietnam agreed to accelerate synergy between their development strategies, and implement in earnest the cooperation plan between the two governments on synergising the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the "Two Corridors and One Economic Circle" strategy. Beijing and Hanoi also inked 45 cooperation deals. Xi and To Lam, general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee, also attended the launch ceremony of the China-Vietnam railway cooperation mechanism, a milestone project for the BRI. Chinese data shows that in 2024, trade between China and Vietnam reached about US$260.7 million, a 13.5 percent year-on-year increase.

On April 17, during Xi's visit to Malaysia, which is currently the country coordinator for China-ASEAN dialogue relations and assumes the ASEAN chairmanship, the two countries released a joint statement in which both countries agreed to elevate the bilateral relationship to building a high-level strategic China-Malaysia community with a shared future to accelerate modernisation efforts and jointly promote regional and global prosperity and stability. They announced they will "look forward to the conclusion of an effective and substantive Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) in 2026." They have also reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening rail transportation and infrastructure cooperation and contributing to the realisation of the Pan-Asian Railway. A total of 26 cooperation agreements were signed during the visit. In 2024, trade between China and Malaysia exceeded US$210 billion.

In their joint statement on April 18, China and Cambodia declared they will jointly build "an all-weather community with a shared future in the new era" and fully implement the China-proposed Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative and Global Civilisation Initiative. They vowed to deepen practical cooperation across various fields, advance the construction of Cambodia's Industrial and Technological Corridor and Fish and Rice Corridor, and strengthen collaboration in energy, transportation and other key sectors. A total of 37 cooperation agreements were signed between China and Cambodia during Xi's visit.

At a press briefing on April 18 in Beijing, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, said that Xi's tour has sent a strong signal that China firmly defends multilateralism and international trade rules.

At a central conference on work related to neighbouring countries held in Beijing on April 8 and 9, Xi called for building a community with a shared future with neighbouring countries. The meeting emphasised the need to work with neighbours to consolidate strategic mutual trust, support regional countries in pursuing development paths suited to their respective conditions and properly manage differences.

Tourist Tax-free Refund Scheme Streamlined and Expanded

China is rolling out a tax refund-upon-purchase policy for tourists across the country, the State Taxation Administration announced on April 5.

Foreign tourists will be able to instantly claim value-added tax (VAT) rebates at tax-free stores after they pre-authorise their credit cards with a guaranteed sum. The refunds can then be used to buy more in real time. When they leave China, customs will conduct checks before releasing the credit card guarantee.

Foreign tourists will see the benefits of the refund policy while still in the country, and exit procedures will be expedited, compared to the former refund-on-departure process.

The policy has been piloted in municipalities and provinces, including Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen, as well as Guangdong, Sichuan and Zhejiang.

离境退税代理
TAX REFUND

Experts said that the new policy, plus the visa-free transit policy, is helpful to build a friendly, efficient and convenient tourism environment for China and will further stimulate foreign tourists' consumption which will also promote economic development. Official data on April 15 showed that since China extended the visa-free transit to 240 hours last December, the country has seen around 9.2 million foreign entries by March 31, 40.2 percent year-on-year growth, with 71.3 percent enjoying the visa-free transit policy.

Food for Thought: PKU Postgrad Stirs Pot with School Cafeteria Career

Netizen Comments:

- A PKU grad working in a cafeteria? This surprising choice challenges the elitist assumption that top diplomas must lead to high-paying jobs. Highly educated people should be free to choose simpler work. We should respect their choice as long as it is made of their own will and in their own interests.
- If I were her parents, I'd be disappointed. After investing two decades of time, money and effort into raising a PKU postgrad, she ends up ladling food in a cafeteria? What was the point of going to a top university?
- Gen Z wants more than money. Today's young professionals care about work-life balance, personal growth and mental well-being. High salaries and social status are no longer the only goals when choosing a career.

Source: Sina Weibo

Expert Comments:

Yu Gui, chief commentator, The Paper: "The ultimate goal of education is to help individuals gain more freedom of choice. If all top university graduates funnel into the same industries – tech, finance, public service or academia – that would be a real imbalance. Everyone is different, not just in ability and academic background, but in interests, values and views on life. We should embrace this diversity."

Xiong Bingqi, author and education commentator: "It's unfair to judge a graduate's job choice as a 'waste of talent' simply because it doesn't match their major or diploma. A degree should expand one's career possibilities, not limit them. In the end, it's about their qualities, capabilities, and most importantly, their will."

Jiang Deyu, media critic: "Society needs a more inclusive way of valuing different occupations. We must move beyond stereotypes about blue-collar jobs. True progress lies in respecting career choices that deviate from the so-called 'standard path.'"

Two years ago, Huang Xiaoyi, a journalism graduate from the prestigious Peking University (PKU), made headlines when she turned down high-paying job offers to work at the university's cafeteria. Now, her story is once again the subject of widespread public attention after she confirmed in late March that she had resigned from the position last year, without revealing her future plans.

After graduating in 2022, Huang declined offers from internet firms and major media outlets, opting instead to take a physically demanding role at PKU's campus cafeteria. There, she earned the affectionate nickname "Mama Huang" from students. Her daily tasks included chopping vegetables, ladling soup and serving food, often while on her feet for hours. Despite the lower pay and strenuous work, she said she found meaning and satisfaction in the simplicity and physicality of the job, preferring it over the stress of corporate life.

On March 31, Huang opened a RedNote account called "I'm Mama Huang" and posted a video reflecting on her experience. In it, she revealed that she had left the job the previous year and explained that working in the cafeteria was part of her long-held dream to one day become a cafeteria manager and promote healthy nutrition.

Her story reignited online debate. Some criticised her decision, calling it a waste of educational resources and claiming that someone with her credentials should take on more competitive roles. Others argued that a PKU graduate choosing "menial" work reflected a lack of ambition. But many netizens defended her choice, praising her for following her passion and rejecting societal expectations. Some pointed out that the backlash revealed an underlying societal bias against blue-collar work.

In response to the controversy, Huang posted again on April 3, writing: "The path of life is not just about going up or down – it can extend in every direction."

Table Tennis Champ Serves Up Controversy with PKU Admission

On April 2, 2025, Peking University (PKU) announced the names of 13 candidates admitted to its postgraduate programmes in physical education. Among them was 24-year-old table tennis star Wang Chuqin, who will begin full-time studies at the university this September.

Wang is one of China's top table tennis talents. He clinched gold in both mixed doubles and the men's team event at the 2024 Paris Olympics, and previously won the men's singles title at the World Table Tennis Finals in 2022, 2023 and 2024.

His admission to PKU has ignited debate online, not for his athletic achievements but for how he got in. While most of China's 3.88 million postgraduate applicants had to sit a rigourous nationwide written exam in December followed by an interview in March, Wang was exempt from the preliminary written test. He only participated in the second-round interview held by PKU.

On April 2, PKU's Department of Physical Education explained that Wang received a written exam exemption due to his status as an Olympic champion.

The news drew mixed reactions across social media. Many netizens questioned whether the exemption was fair to other candidates who spent months preparing for the written exam. "It's unfair," some argued. "Everyone else had to compete under the same rules."

Others, however, saw the decision as justified. They argued that Wang's outstanding achievements in international sport more than qualified him for a spot at one of China's top universities.

Commentators noted that the divided opinions reflect broader tensions in China's education system. In a society long dominated by exam-based assessments, many still see standardised testing as the most objective method of selecting talent. But experts say a more mature system should embrace diverse standards and pathways for evaluating merit.

INFLUENCER

IShowSpeed

Recently, American YouTube sensation Darren Jason Watkins Jr., better known as IShowSpeed (or simply "Speed"), made headlines with a high-energy, high-visibility tour of China.

Born in 2005 in Cincinnati, Ohio, Speed began uploading gaming content to YouTube in 2016. Now 20 years old, he is renowned for his dramatic, often chaotic style, marked by explosive reactions and over-the-top antics across a mix of gaming and IRL (in-real-life) streams filmed around the world. With over 37 million subscribers, Speed is one of the most recognisable English-speaking streamers globally. Since 2022, Speed has livestreamed his travels to about 25 countries, drawing millions of fans worldwide and positioning himself as an unlikely yet effective cultural ambassador.

From March 24 to April 9, 2025, Speed embarked on a whirlwind 17-day tour of China. Over the course of the trip, he livestreamed 50 hours of content, amassing more than 90 million views on YouTube. His six-hour stream in Shanghai alone pulled in 5.6 million views. Throughout his journey, Speed offered his global audience a window into China's dynamic culture and technology. He captured Shanghai's dazzling skyline, climbed the Great Wall in Beijing and visited Shaolin monks in Henan Province. He also spotlighted everyday moments: sampling street food, riding high-speed trains and interacting with delivery drones.

Chinese netizens have largely embraced Speed's trip, applauding him for showing a modern, clean and peaceful image of China to the world. His tour has been widely seen as a success in promoting cultural understanding and offering a more nuanced view of the country to Western audiences.

Birds of a Feather: Celebrity Power Brings Youth to Birdwatching Craze

In China, birdwatching is affectionately nicknamed "bird shooting," a playful term referring to the use of telephoto lenses to photograph birds from a distance. Traditionally, it's been a hobby dominated by middle-aged and retired hobbyists – those with time, money and patience to spare. But now, a younger generation is flocking to the pastime.

Leading the charge is 33-year-old actor and heartthrob Li Xian, who boasts 24.7 million followers on Sina Weibo. A longtime photography enthusiast, Li tried his hand at bird photography for the first time in late March 2025. On March 28, he posted a series of bird photos taken at Beijing's Yuyuantan Park. The post quickly went viral, amassing over 710,000 likes and more than 1 million shares.

Even before the photos dropped, a hashtag about Li's birdwatching had already made it to Sina Weibo's top trending list, drawing more than 130 million views and sparking over 530,000 comments.

Li's star power has introduced a whole new audience to the meditative joys of bird photography and the quiet beauty of nature. Many netizens commented that they were inspired to give the hobby a try themselves.

The buzz even caught the attention of China's Ministry of Ecology and Environment, which praised Li on April 4 for helping raise public interest in birdwatching and ecological awareness.

China and Indonesia

New Course of Cooperation

In an exclusive interview, China's Ambassador to Indonesia Wang Lutong talks about the importance of deepening China-Indonesia ties, emphasising shared development goals, regional stability and the rising influence of the Global South

By Wang Shihan

With the launch of the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway in late 2023, a landmark project under the Belt and Road Initiative, cooperation between China and Indonesia, Southeast Asia's most populous nation, has significantly deepened. As the two countries prepare to celebrate 75 years of diplomatic relations in 2025, both are working to usher in a new era of collaboration, said Wang Lutong, China's Ambassador to Indonesia.

In an exclusive interview with *ChinaReport*, Wang shared his experience riding the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, revealing that future priorities will centre on high-quality Belt and Road collaboration aligned with Indonesia's development agenda.

This will focus on "more livelihood-enhancing projects and people-connecting initiatives that bring tangible benefits to citizens of both nations," the ambassador said.

Wang offered insights into the future of China-Indonesia ties and the broader significance of their partnership in shaping a more equitable global order. He emphasised that strengthening bilateral ties is not only essential for the well-being of their nearly two billion combined population, but also critical to advancing cooperation among the Global South in an increasingly volatile international landscape.

ChinaReport: Shortly after your appointment, you took a ride on the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway (JB HSR, locally known as Whoosh). What were your impressions of the journey?

Wang Lutong: I assumed my position in Indonesia in October 2024, and the one-year anniversary celebration of the JB HSR's official operation was the first major event I attended after taking office. Following the inauguration ceremony for Karawang Station in late December 2024, the last station to open, I made a special trip to ride the train, visiting all four stations along the route to gain a deeper understanding of station operations and surrounding infrastructure development.

I had three distinct impressions. First, the JB HSR carries a strong Chinese imprint. A Chinese passenger would feel instantly at home, from the platform design and cabin furnishings to the seamless travel experience, it mirrors riding a high-speed train in China.

Second, the JB HSR delivers impressive speed and efficiency. Operating at 350 km/h, in line with China's high-speed rail standards, it ranks among the fastest in the world. The transformative impact of this modern transportation system on Indonesia's connectivity is remarkable, and it highlights the excellence and reliability of Chinese high-speed rail technology.

Third, the JB HSR is becoming increasingly lively. During my visits, I saw many Indonesian passengers, office commuters and families travelling together. The stations were bustling, with shops lining the surrounding areas. Since its launch in October 2023, ridership has steadily grown, with daily passenger numbers peaking at over 24,000. The high-speed rail is on track to become a part of daily life for many Indonesians.

CR: Do you think the success of this project has influenced perceptions of China-Indonesia cooperation among the Indonesian public and business community?

WL: Absolutely. The JB HSR is a golden calling card for China-Indonesia collaboration. Its timely completion and continued safe, efficient operations have strengthened the Indonesian public's trust in Chinese technology, products and engineering capabilities.

Over 75 percent of the services and procurement for the JB HSR project were sourced locally in Indonesia, creating 30,000 jobs and significantly boosting the country's economic and social

Passengers take photos at Halim Station in Jakarta, Indonesia, November 22, 2023 (Photo by VCG)

development. The project also trained a large number of local employees, enhancing their professional skills, with many Indonesians directly benfitting.

Moreover, during the construction and operation of the JB HSR, China and Indonesia worked closely to overcome numerous challenges, including the pandemic. The Chinese government, enterprises and financial institutions demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility throughout, further deepening mutual trust and friendship between our two countries.

In sum, the railway not only promotes local development in Indonesia, but also strengthens the economic ties between the two nations. It has fostered greater mutual understanding between our societies, laying a solid foundation for deeper bilateral cooperation.

CR: What other tangible benefits has the high-speed railway brought to Indonesia?

WL: As Southeast Asia's first high-speed railway, the JB HSR's greatest significance is that it truly belongs to the Indonesian people and benefits the public at large.

Since opening, the travel time between Jakarta and Bandung has been cut from over three hours to just 40 minutes, easing traffic congestion and providing locals with a fast, convenient transportation option. It has spurred commercial development and tourism along the route, accelerating the formation of a high-speed rail economic corridor.

Official Indonesian statistics show that, by using electricity, the JB HSR saves nearly US$200 million in fuel costs annually. During its construction between 2019 and 2023, the project contributed nearly US$6 billion to the GDP of Jakarta and West Java.

The JB HSR's success has seen "made in China" become synonymous with quality and innovation in Indonesia, winning the trust and preference of Indonesian stakeholders. Beyond giving Chinese companies a competitive edge in both global expansion and the Indonesian market, the project has attracted significant international attention. Numerous foreign diplomats and delegations have conducted study visits to learn from this exemplary model of China-Indonesia cooperation.

It's fair to say that the JB HSR has become a tangible bridge for China-Indonesia exchange and collaboration, driving the further development of bilateral relations.

CR: We've seen growing interest from Chinese companies about investing in Indonesia. How do you view this trend?

WL: China is an important source of foreign investment for Indonesia. According to figures released by Indonesian authorities, companies from the Chinese mainland invested US$8.1 billion in Indonesia in 2024, making it the third-largest investor after Singapore and China's Hong Kong SAR. Chinese investment spans a wide range of sectors, from infrastructure, manufacturing and industrial parks to energy and mining, agriculture, fisheries and finance. Alongside major landmark projects, we're also seeing a number of "small but beautiful" initiatives take root.

In November 2024, China and Indonesia issued a joint statement pledging to build a new framework for comprehensive development cooperation, which signals broad prospects for deepening investment collaboration.

Indonesia, with its young population and fast-growing digital economy, offers huge consumption potential. However, infrastructure and logistics still need improvement. Compared with the Chinese market, Indonesia's e-commerce platforms rely more on social media for marketing, and small- and medium-sized enterprises dominate the landscape. Building brand recognition here takes time. Also, the market access system and regulatory compliance requirements can be quite complex for foreign investors.

Therefore, Chinese investors must make great efforts in localisation and risk control in their Indonesia operations, especially through proper market research and regulation compliance. Companies should fulfil their corporate social responsibility to integrate with local communities for win-win development, for example, by contributing to community building, disaster relief, education and support people in need.

CR: During Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto's state visit to China in 2024, the two heads of state agreed to deepen cooperation based on five pillars: political, economic, cultural, maritime and security. What's the significance of this?

WL: During President Prabowo's visit, the two sides reached a significant consensus on the future of bilateral ties. They agreed to upgrade from the original "four-pillar drive" framework to a "five-pillar" cooperation model by adding security as a new dimension. This marks a deepening of bilateral ties and reflects the growing strategic mutual trust between the two countries.

The inclusion of security cooperation responds to changes in the regional and global landscape. As large developing countries and emerging economies, China and Indonesia both face traditional and non-traditional security challenges, ranging from transnational crime and terrorism to cybersecurity and maritime security. Strengthening cooperation in these areas will help us jointly maintain regional peace and stability, providing a more secure environment for development.

Wang Lutong, Chinese ambassador to Indonesia (second from left), Indonesian Ambassador to China Djauhari Oratmangun (first from left) and Dino Patti Djalal, founder and chairman of the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia and a former Indonesian diplomat (right), unveil a logo to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the establishment of China-Indonesia diplomatic relations, Jakarta, Indonesia, January 7, 2025. The logo was designed by Martha Cahya Angga Saputra (second from right), who won first prize in the event's logo design competition (Photo by VCG)

This upgrade marks a new stage in the China-Indonesia comprehensive strategic partnership. It makes our cooperation more comprehensive and balanced. Political trust provides a firm foundation, economic collaboration drives shared development, cultural exchanges strengthen people-to-people ties, maritime cooperation deepens our "blue partnership," and the addition of security enhances our strategic coordination.

CR: As China and Indonesia mark the 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties in 2025, what key lessons can be drawn from their journey?

WL: Over the past 75 years, China-Indonesia relations have maintained healthy development, gaining valuable experiences that warrant careful reflection and consolidation.

First, head-of-state diplomacy has provided essential strategic guidance. Over the past decade, presidents of our two countries have exchanged visits and held more than 10 meetings and phone calls. Their leadership has offered strong political support and clear direction for the relationship.

Second, win-win cooperation has been the main engine driving our ties. The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway has served over eight million passengers. In 2024, bilateral trade reached US$147.8 billion, a 6.1 percent increase year-on-year, with China remaining Indonesia's largest trading partner for the 12th consecutive year. The recent upgrade of the Batang Industrial Park into a special economic zone is injecting fresh momentum into the "Two Countries, Twin Parks" initiative.

Third, people-to-people exchanges have played a vital role in fostering mutual understanding. In 2024, 1.44 million Chinese tourists visited Indonesia. Traditional music ensembles and Xinjiang art troupes from China performed in Indonesia, while high-level Indonesian religious delegations visited China multiple times, deepening friendship and mutual appreciation.

Fourth, the two countries have worked together to uphold fairness and justice in global affairs. In 2022 and

2023, Indonesia successfully hosted the G20 Summit and East Asia Cooperation Leaders' Meetings, with China offering strong support. As influential developing nations, China and Indonesia jointly champion Asian values – peace, cooperation, inclusiveness and integration, and work hand-in-hand with the Global South to safeguard shared interests.

As we mark the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations, China and Indonesia are looking to the future.

First, we'll maintain close high-level exchanges and strengthen strategic communication to further build political trust.

Second, we'll uphold principles of strategic autonomy and sovereign equality, aligning Chinese modernisation with Indonesia's "Golden Indonesia 2045" vision and deepening high-quality Belt and Road cooperation.

Third, we'll continue to foster people-to-people exchanges and strengthen the social foundations of our partnership. And fourth, we'll work together to safeguard regional peace and stability, building the "Five Homes," marked by peace, tranquility, prosperity, beauty and friendship.

CR: This year also marks the 70th anniversary of the 1955 Bandung Conference held in Indonesia. What relevance does it hold today?

WL: The world today is undergoing profound changes, with the rise of the "Global South" pushing the international order towards greater balance and equity. Against this backdrop, revisiting the spirit and historical significance of the 1955 Bandung Conference offers valuable insight.

The Bandung Conference was a milestone in Global South unity and cooperation. It championed the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the "Bandung Spirit," promoted the democratisation of international relations, and laid a foundation for today's South-South cooperation. Its emphasis on independence, self-determination and non-interference in internal affairs remains highly relevant in today's global pursuit of fairness and justice.

In the face of unilateralism and challenges to global governance, China continues to advocate for genuine multilateralism. We firmly support the UN-centred international system, the international order based on international law, and the fundamental norms of international relations grounded in the UN Charter. China also supports a stronger voice for Global South countries in international affairs and is committed to guiding global governance in a more just and equitable direction.

CR: Indonesia recently joined BRICS. How might this influence its development and bilateral cooperation with China?

WL: The BRICS mechanism serves as a crucial platform for fostering solidarity among the Global South and advancing the reform of global governance. Indonesia's joining BRICS this year has further enhanced the group's representativeness and strengthened the collective force of the Global South in solidarity and cooperation.

This development will serve as a springboard for both nations to deepen comprehensive, multi-tiered collaboration, bringing fresh momentum to regional peace and prosperity.

Indonesia can actively participate in BRICS cooperation across a range of areas, including trade and investment, financial systems, AI, the digital economy, mineral resources, green development, healthcare and governance.

Notably, President Prabowo Subianto recently announced Indonesia's intention to join the New Development Bank, which would allow Indonesia to secure funding for domestic projects and inject new growth momentum into its economy.

Within the BRICS framework, Indonesia can also be engaged in cooperation on various fields, such as trade and finance, AI, healthcare and green development.

China and Indonesia are good neighbours and partners. With Indonesia's entry into BRICS as a new opportunity, the two sides will further deepen all-round, multi-level cooperation, jointly contributing more positive energy and momentum to regional peace and prosperity.

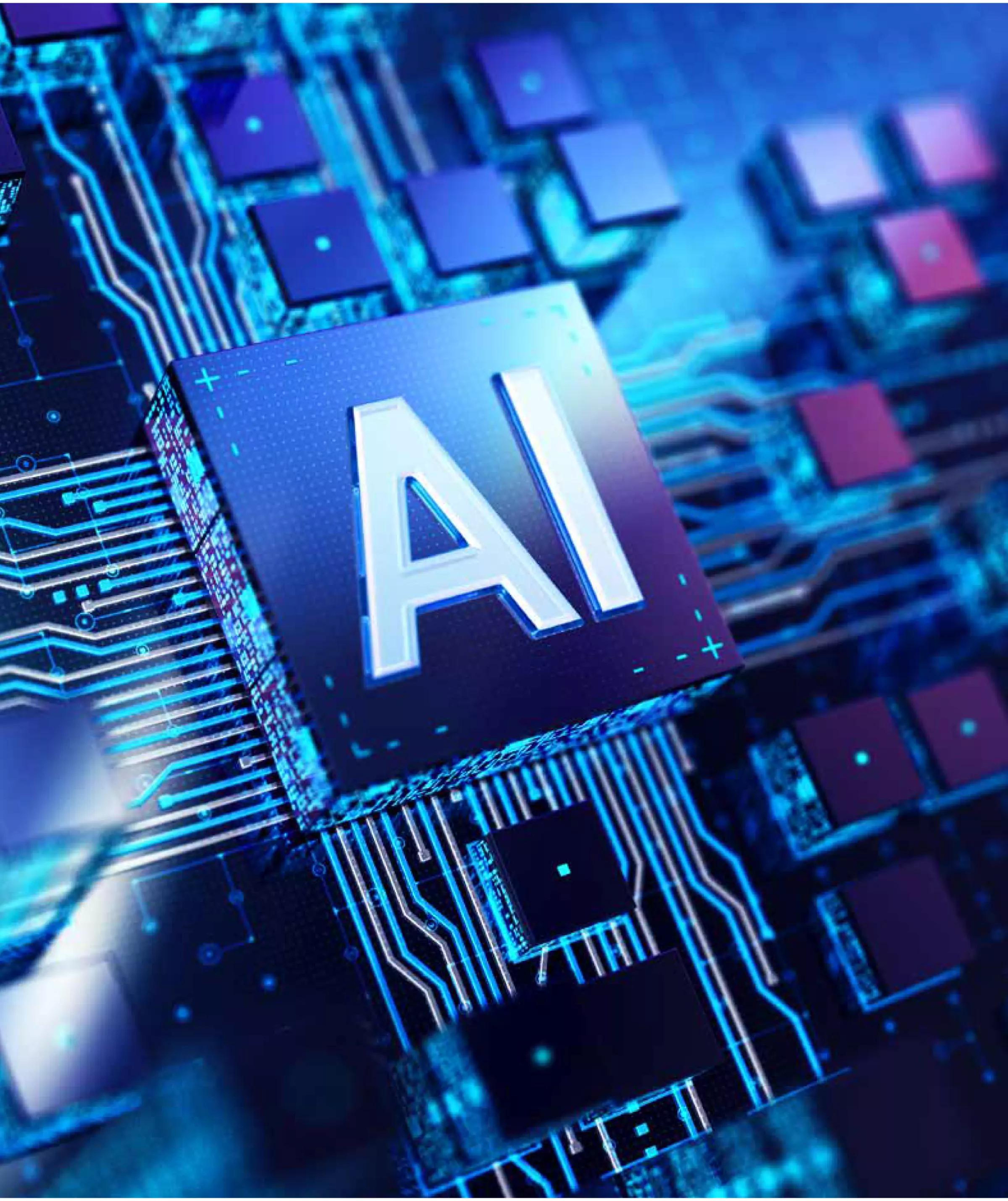
CR: There still seems to be a lack of mutual understanding, and even some prejudice, between the peoples of the two countries. In your view, what should be done to improve this situation? Will there be concrete measures to expand people-to-people exchanges?

WL: Both sides will take concrete steps to expand people-to-people exchanges, including improving visa facilitation, increasing direct flights, promoting educational and cultural exchanges, enhancing tourism cooperation and deepening economic and trade interactions.

China and Indonesia both have long histories and rich cultures, and the friendship between our peoples runs deep. However, due to language barriers, geographical distance and limited access to information, there are still gaps in mutual understanding.

To address this, both countries have expanded cooperation in recent years through initiatives such as Confucius Institutes, scholarship programmes and Chinese language education. Looking forward, we will continue to grow these efforts, especially through scholarships and student exchanges, so more young people can become ambassadors of China-Indonesia friendship.

Economic, tourism and local-level exchanges are also vital for fostering emotional connection. Tourism and local exchanges bring emotional connections in a more intuitive way – more and more Chinese tourists are visiting Indonesia, and we hope to welcome more Indonesian friends to China to experience our diverse culture and rapid development.★


AI

WIRED WORLD

The AI revolution in automation is underway. ChinaReport explores how the tech is raising new hopes – and tough questions about trust, transparency and oversight

AI and Healthcare

Second Opinions

The cyber physician will scan you now: how AI models are enhancing diagnostics and treatment in hospitals

By Niu He

A doctor analyzes scans with the help of AI models, Huzhou, Zhejiang Province, February 21, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

After studying a MRI test on February 13 at Beijing Children's Hospital (BCH), 13 top pediatricians were surprised when the country's first AI pediatrician came to an identical conclusion as theirs in the case of an 8-year-old boy who had been having seizures.

"We were all shocked by the result," Ni Xin, the hospital director and surgical specialist at the ENT department who chaired the joint human-AI consultation, told *ChinaReport*.

Driven by the release of new AI DeepSeek in January, the use of AI medical applications has rapidly spread to over 100 hospitals across the country, transforming the medical landscape, despite debates over technological advances and ethical concerns. In November 2024, the National Health Commission (NHC) issued guidelines on AI application scenarios, covering all medical services from patient appointments to doctors' training.

AI Rush

On February 27, Ni was impressed by a 5-year-old girl's mother from Chongqing who instead of showing the diagnostic and medical records of her daughter, handed him a paper printed with DeepSeek consultations.

Replacing search engine Baidu.com, DeepSeek is an upgraded platform that can provide comprehensive and systematic answers to patients before they see a doctor, Yu Jintai, chief physician of the neurology department, Huashan Hospital Affiliated to Fudan University in Shanghai, told *ChinaReport*.

In August 2024, BCH cooperated with Baichuan AI, established in 2023, to roll out five AI Large Models, including the AI pediatrician to aid human doctors.

Ni's ultimate goal is to have a million AI pediatricians to bridge the healthcare gaps in underserved communities and remote regions.

The country had only 205,800 pediatricians in May 2024, according to the NHC, whereas the population aged between 0-15 was almost 248 million in 2023, China's National Bureau of Statistics revealed.

"Since we did our first AI pediatrician consultations, at least six hospitals contacted us hoping to introduce similar products," Ni said.

At Huashan Hospital Affiliated to Fudan University in Shanghai, internal tests of AI applications have covered scenarios of multiple scientific research projects and clinical practices.

Cheng Sijie, deputy director of the big data centre at Huashan Hospital, told *ChinaReport* that it only took a few days for the hospital to launch a platform run by DeepSeek, but the critical challenge is how to standardise AI products in the medical field.

Hallucinatory Symptoms

In one of the scenarios at Huashan Hospital, AI assistants take detailed patient records before a consultation, enabling doctors to have a comprehensive view of the case.

However, Cheng stressed the records must be absolutely accurate.

"Only if they pass extremely stringent tests can AI large models particularly trained to make clinical records be used at our hospital," Cheng told *ChinaReport*.

According to Cheng, Huashan Hospital has tested different large models run by DeepSeek. One essential criteria is their abilities in filing and updating clinical records.

"Doctors must double-check all digital records taken by AI models to ensure the quality and safety of healthcare services," Cheng said.

His caution is warranted due to a phenomenon called AI hallucinations, which means AI models misinterpret patterns and generate incorrect or misleading outputs.

Because of these glitches, some clinicians, like those at Tongji Hospital in Shanghai and Huazhong University

of Science and Technology in Wuhan, Hubei Province, are more cautious.

"AI models can make blunders in clinical practices, say by taking signal interference in medical imaging as signs of lesions," Guo Wei, deputy chief of the infectious diseases department at Tongji Hospital, told *ChinaReport*.

According to Yu, the credibility of AI platforms depends on accurate and professional data input, as mistakes lead to erroneous results.

At BCH, more than 300 top doctors have contributed their knowledge and decades of records of cases to the AI pediatrician application.

"To reduce AI hallucinations, it is essential to guarantee data uniqueness and accuracy from the very beginning of the modeling," Ni said, adding that compared to DeepSeek, AI pediatricians designed for the medical field perform in more precise ways.

The possibility of hallucinations requires doctors to double-check AI responses to avoid medical negligence, otherwise they will be responsible for the consequences. Besides, the hospitals and developers are accountable for negligence caused by medical staff operating the AI without training or flawed algorithm design, Deng Yong, professor of medical and health law at the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, told *ChinaReport*.

Irreplaceable Roles

The increasing rollout of AI in healthcare is heating up debate over whether they can replace doctors.

According to Guo, medical imaging diagnosticians are probably the first to be substituted. "AI can discover nodules that can't be discerned by the human eye from X-rays or computerised scans," Guo said. Human doctors may only need to assist or supervise AI operations.

But a majority of doctors disagree. "AI and doctors are interdependent. The former will assist the latter without replacing them," Ni said.

In interviews with *ChinaReport*, a number of doctors from various fields including infectious disease, neurology and surgery said AI is a supplementary tool that cannot replace doctors' decision-making roles.

"No matter how advanced the technologies get, the deep thinking and quick reactions of doctors are irreplaceable," Sun Yong'an, chief neurologist at Peking University First Hospital in Beijing, told *ChinaReport*.

"In addition to their professional background, doctors judge diseases according to their clinical experience, which is critical but hard for AI to emulate," Yu said.

Digital Docs

According to Ni, BCH's project to roll out thousands of AI pediatricians is on track. "Large models can theoretically produce a huge number of AI doctors for children," he said.

BCH and Baichuan AI plan to expand the programme to 150 pilot primary hospitals in Hebei Province before introducing AI pediatricians nationwide.

Huang Hong, director of the big data centre of Huashan Hospital, advised hospitals to establish different AI platforms instead of relying solely on DeepSeek. "So you can support all kinds of needs from different medical fields," she said, predicting that the future of AI healthcare could be an integration of thousands of models.

In addition to large models, AI hospitals, running in a closed loop to help AI doctors improve their skills from diagnosis to rehabilitation, are being trialed. In November, Agent Hospital, an AI hospital developed by the Institute for AI Industry Research at Tsinghua University in Beijing, tested 42 AI doctors to diagnose and treat over 300 diseases.

"The hospital marks big progress from AI large models, as it enables AI doctors to deal with diseases in a complex environment by communication, coordination and equipment utilisation," Liu Yang, executive director of the institute, told *ChinaReport*, adding that their next goal is to connect the AI hospital with the real world through advanced virtual reality (VR) technology.

However, Zhao is not so upbeat about AI healthcare. "It's still too early to know whether AI technologies can be truly applied or will only be used as a kind of convention," he said.

Guo is cautious too. "Many hospitals introduce AI platforms because they're afraid of lagging behind, but few use the technology to meet the clinical demands for deepened research."

Deng pointed out that medical AI technologies developed without industry standards and the discrepancies caused by different platforms will affect cooperation between hospitals and increase the difficulty of supervision.

"AI technology shouldn't be developed in a rush. Its true value can only be realised by stable and well-designed progress," Jin Chunlin, director of the Shanghai Health Development Research Centre, told *ChinaReport*.★

AI and Education

Learning Curve

As more and more teachers and students in China are using AI tools, it has stirred wide public concern about how to maintain academic honesty and critical thinking

By Sun Houming

"When homework piles high,
and deadlines draw so nigh,
who do we turn to, quick and wise?
DeepSeek Chat – our saving prize!

Titled "DeepSeek to the Rescue," this is from a poem written by the large language model using the prompt "students using DeepSeek to do homework."

Zhang Siling, an eighth grader at Beijing No.18 Middle School, has used DeepSeek to help write a composition for her Chinese class. She typed in the question, and in seconds DeepSeek generated a nicely written article.

A cat-and-mouse game is happening between students and teachers in China's primary and middle schools. Like Zhang, more students are relying on AI tools for their homework. As AI's language capability is way beyond that of teenagers, they simplify the language and syntax to make it convincing. Teachers have to turn detective to trace AI use in the assignments.

China has pushed a new AI initiative in education. In March, Beijing education authorities mandated primary and secondary schools to provide AI courses from the autumn semester for at least eight hours. Children as young as 6 will learn how to engage with AI-powered tools.

A powerful helper for learning or a thief that steals children's intelligence, the use of AI has sparked public debates just as the ethics of technology use has become a major concern for educators.

Digital Tutor

Before DeepSeek, Zhang Siling was already handy with AI tools such as Doubao, a ChatGPT-like conversational bot developed by TikTok owner ByteDance, and iFlytek Spark, an AI solution provider developed by iFlytek as an alternative to ChatGPT.

"Give me the solution to this maths problem and explain it at my level as an eighth grader," is an example instruction Zhang gives to a generative AI tool. While the previous tools she used remain in a "Q&A" phase, DeepSeek can give answers and present a thorough explanation of the problem-solving process. For her, DeepSeek is a better tutor than her parents and teachers.

According to a study conducted by *China Children's Daily*, which surveyed 11,742 primary school students over 29 provinces and districts in China, 26.6 percent of students have used AI for homework help. More than 60 percent of interviewees used AI to solve problems, 40 percent used it to make presentations, and over 36 percent used AI to write compositions.

On social media there are many suggestions for students to better use DeepSeek to help them study.

For studying Chinese and English, DeepSeek can communicate with students in the same voice as characters in literary classics, such as Hamlet in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* or Lin Daiyu in Cao Xueqin's 18th-century classic *Dream of the Red Chamber*. It can weave new English vocabulary into a short article to help students better memorise the words and understand how to use them in speaking and writing.

When teaching the poetry of Li He, a poet from the Tang Dynasty (618-907), Zhang Junqi, a Chinese teacher at Beijing No.18 Middle School, uses AI to visualise the poet's works.

Li He (790-816)'s poetry is characterised by its vivid imagery and idiosyncratic diction. Zhang Junqi used ByteDance's Doubao to generate pictures based on Li's poems and used the AI video generator Hailuo AI to generate videos. "I choose different AI tools based on the content I'm teaching and the effect I hope to create," Zhang Junqi told *ChinaReport*.

Education Revolution

Schools across the country are making efforts to reform their curriculums to include AI education.

On February 19, 2025, China's Ministry of Education announced a list of 184 primary and secondary schools in 31 provinces and municipalities selected to pilot AI education programmes.

Primary schools will introduce AI concepts, while middle schools will teach students how to use AI in learning and daily life. High schools will focus on enhancing AI applications and innovation.

Students try out AI tutoring devices at the 7th World Voice Expo, Hefei, Anhui Province, October 26, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

Smart education companies are accelerating AI-powered education expansion. Bai Jingfeng, technical director of TAL Education Group, China's largest K-12 after-school tutoring service provider, is project chief of MathGPT, the first domestic AI tool designed to help students, teachers and professionals solve complex mathematical problems.

He told *ChinaReport* that DeepSeek-R1 is like a graduate from a prestigious university who is both good at science and arts, and is skilled at logical reasoning, structured problem-solving and explaining complex concepts.

The next objective is to make DeepSeek-R1 grow from a college graduate to a mature teacher. This requires making it more compatible with the latest K-12 curriculum system to provide customised plans catering to the needs of different students, Bai said.

Educators as Gatekeepers

The AI self-study room is a new business model that Bai describes as "technology providing services." In China's major cities, AI self-study rooms are popular with primary and secondary school students. They provide a tablet computer for each cubicle, which handles the teaching and exercises for each student. AI supervisors track mistakes, compile errors and offer AI-generated learning plans for pupils in real time. According to a report by *Jiupai News*, by July 2024, there were already 50,000 AI self-study rooms in China, mainly targeting students aged 8 to 18.

Educators and parents are still concerned over the technology's "double-edged-sword" effect on schoolchildren. Many fear students will use AI to cheat on assignments and that critical thinking ability will be hampered.

An experienced primary school teacher in Northeast China told *ChinaReport* that, "In the past, less experienced teachers could teach students based on their teaching plans. But now students can learn knowledge through AI in advance – sometimes they even know more than teachers. AI has closed the information gap between students and teachers."

Professor Yu Shengquan, executive director of the Advanced Innovation Centre for Future Education, Beijing Normal University, stressed that as more students use AI-driven learning tools, teachers should not just impart knowledge but also skillfully use AI to help students learn and solve problems. "More importantly, teachers should serve as gatekeepers to guide students to use AI properly," Yu told *ChinaReport*.

He suggested educators design more open, practical and innovative assignments instead of giving repetitive and mechanical learning tasks. This will develop students' critical thinking and creativity while using AI-powered learning tools.

During the two sessions on March 6, 2025, Liu Qingfeng, president of AI technology firm iFlytek, suggested innovating the exam system, including college entrance examinations. He proposed that 70 percent of exams would be based on the traditional system, with 30 percent based on open-book exams in which students would be evaluated on their innovation capability with the use of AI tools.

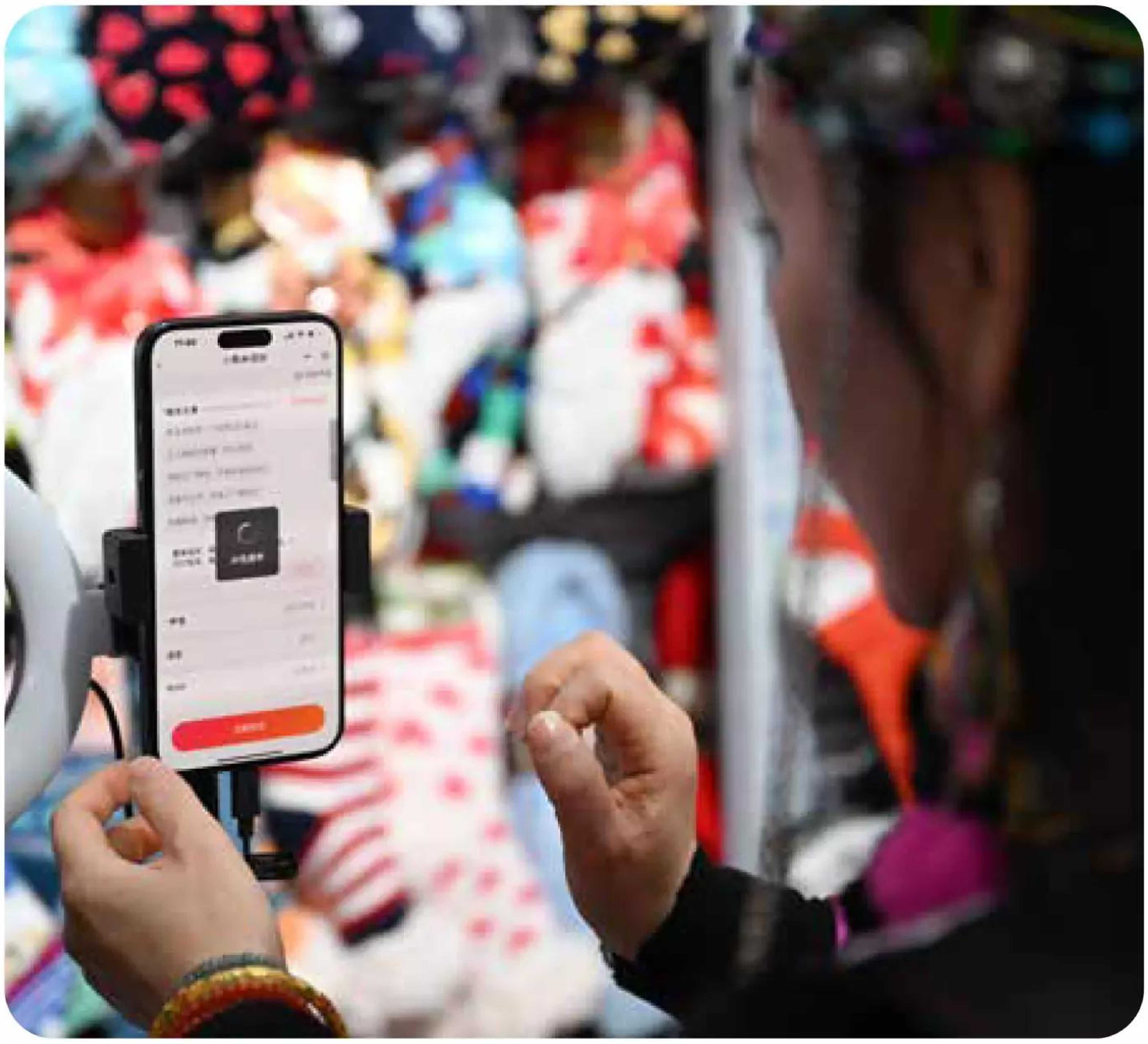
"Even though the exam-oriented education system would not be shaken up in the short term, the talent evaluation system will surely change with the rapid development of AI in the long run," Yu told *ChinaReport*.★

AI and E-commerce

Bot and Sold

AI tools are changing how businesses sell, market and operate online. But in the race to adopt the tech, experts warn that real transformation requires more than just plugging in a large language model

By Meng Qian and Xie Ying



Sock vendor Fu Jiangyan uses AI models to generate text for an advertisement, Yiwu, Zhejiang Province, February 25, 2025(Photo by VCG)

Fu Jiangyan, a sock vendor in Yiwu, Zhejiang Province, is reaching customers worldwide in 36 different languages with the help of AI model DeepSeek.

For over 20 years, Fu has run a sock business at Yiwu International Trade Market, the country's largest hub for factory-direct consumer goods. Though she has created promotional video content for several years, Fu is now using tools on the market's official e-commerce platform Chinagoods – which integrates the Hangzhou-developed AI model – to expand her business at minimal cost.

She simply provides keywords and usage scenarios, and the model generates video scripts. Fu videos herself reading the script in Chinese, and the platform immediately generates dozens of versions where she appears reading the same script in different languages.

After the phrase "A Yiwu seller used DeepSeek to sell out her products" trended on Sina Weibo's hot search list, more than 100 million users visited Chinagoods, a platform favoured by Yiwu vendors, to view the video. Fu said she received a flood of calls from both customers and fellow sellers asking how to use DeepSeek themselves.

Since DeepSeek-V3 was released as an open-source model at the end of 2024 and quickly gained global traction, more enterprises across various sectors have announced they are integrating or experimenting with the model.

Market Winners

According to the Chinagoods AI team, they began localising and adapting DeepSeek to the platform in early 2025, with Fu among its earliest users. After Fu's video went viral and attracted a surge of e-commerce sellers to the site, the tech team had to urgently expand its servers to handle the spike in traffic.

Lou Qinfeng, technology director at Chinagoods, told *ChinaReport* that he has closely followed AI development since ChatGPT captured global attention in 2023. Over the past two years, Lou's team has partnered with top AI firms to train large models specifically tailored for the e-commerce sector.

"Going forward, we'll roll out over 10 AI-powered apps covering product design, display and transactions, contract fulfillment and more," he said.

Other companies are jumping on board. Wuyue Xinghe, a Guangzhou-based multi-channel network (MCN) company, declared February its internal "AI learning month." The company's CEO Sun Shiyong instructed employees to submit at least 10 queries a day to DeepSeek, then select the top three applications for company-wide use.

"Those who master AI will win. Those who wait and see will fall behind," read a 2,000-word company memo, which Sun admits was written with DeepSeek in just 30 seconds. "If I had written it myself, it would've taken half a day or more," Sun said.

Despite the productivity boost, employees are increasingly anxious about job security, especially as reports emerge of companies laying off staff and replacing them with AI systems.

One such case is Shanghai Chicmax Cosmetics, which drew public scrutiny after a screenshot of an alleged internal chat group surfaced online. The image appeared to show the company was planning to cut 50 percent of its legal team, 95 percent of customer service staff, 70 percent of product innovation and 80 percent of content staff.

The drastic cuts left many netizens stunned as a sign of how quickly AI might displace human labour.

"DeepSeek has made AI widely accessible across industries and will certainly replace some basic work, especially tasks that don't require creative thinking," said Cui Lili, director of the E-Commerce Institute at the Shanghai University of Finance and Economics. "But layoffs carried out in the name of AI, especially with such dramatic announcements, likely have other motivations."

After investing in ultra-short dramas on Douyin for advertising, Shanghai Chicmax's annual revenue surged to 4.2 billion yuan (US$642.9m) in 2023, up 56.7 percent from the year before. Ahead of the 2025 Spring Festival, CEO Lü Yixiong announced in an open letter that the company would make AI a core competitive advantage, aiming to reach 10 billion yuan (US$1.4b) in revenue by 2025 and 30 billion yuan (US$4.3b) by 2030.

But the future remains uncertain. According to Beauty in Sight, a media outlet and industry analyst focused on the beauty sector, the gross merchandise value (GMV) of KANS, Shanghai Chicmax's most advertised brand through product placement in ultra-short dramas, on a livestream platform dropped 20 percent year-on-year in January. With AI progressing rapidly, Lü may be adjusting his strategy.

Amid the controversy, Lü responded on WeChat, insisting the company is not planning mass layoffs but is undergoing "restructuring." He claimed the total number of employees would actually grow from 1,900 to 2,700 by year's end. "We'll downsize some departments and expand others to make operations more efficient," he said.

"We don't intend to replace workers with AI. We're just exploring applications, like many others," a company representative told *ChinaReport* on condition of anonymity.

Customer Complaints

Data from iFind, a data provider under financial information company Straight Flush, shows that more than 100 companies have announced collaborations with DeepSeek. According to media reports, by February 21, at least six cosmetics companies had begun integrating DeepSeek for functions ranging from R&D and testing to customer service.

Still, Cui cautions against rushing into AI adoption. "Even if the leaked Shanghai Chicmax restructuring plan is accurate, the changes should be implemented gradually," she said. "An AI model isn't ready to replace legal and customer service teams without targeted training and adaptation."

Xie Linglong, co-founder of a traditional clothing brand, is among those approaching AI with caution. "We're currently using AI tools to generate images, hoping to reduce our reliance on labour-intensive photography, which is the most complicated part of e-commerce. But we've run into issues like awkward hand shapes, mismatched scenarios and the generated clothing not matching the real thing," he told *ChinaReport*.

Gao Lin, who runs an online store selling AI tools, said DeepSeek has made customer service much cheaper. But current systems can only simplify a few functions. "If no one is supervising the AI customer service, problems will inevitably occur," she warned.

Recent reports confirm these limitations. According to *The Paper*, many users complained that AI customer service often fails to answer their questions, especially on after-sales issues. The systems are also notoriously stubborn in not putting customers through to a human when requested.

Zhong Xinlong, AI research director at the Future Industry Institute under the China Centre for Information Industry Development, noted that human representatives still have the edge in one key area: empathy. "AI may sound human and mimic voices well, but that doesn't mean it can replace real conversations. It still struggles with dialects, everyday idioms and emotional connection," he said.

Yuan Bo, a chief engineer at the Zhongguancun Innovation Alliance for New Super-Internet Infrastructure Industries, suspects many companies are simply riding the AI hype. "Connecting to DeepSeek is meaningless if you're not planning to build on it with secondary development or real integration," he said.

Yuan pointed out that widespread transformation will not come until hardware becomes more affordable. "If low-end GPU clusters become widely available and can work well with domestic chips, that might be the moment the industry sees a real turning point," he said. ★

AI and Civil Service

Automatic for the People

AI is now handling paperwork, answering inquiries and even helping draft rulings in some government departments. But where does that leave human employees, and the public they serve?

By Zhang Xinyu and Deng Yanyang

An AI-powered interface that provides government services is shown at a press conference, Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, April 11, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

A new round of online discussion around AI erupted in China after Shenzhen, Guangdong Province deployed 70 AI government employees in February. According to local officials, these AI workers handle 240 tasks, from paperwork and civil services to emergency response and attracting new businesses. Shenzhen has announced that each government department will soon integrate DeepSeek-based services.

By early March, 31 provinces and municipalities across China had incorporated AI models in some aspects of governance. These "AI+civil services" have streamlined public services like applying for a taxi licence. The next step is to explore AI's role in more complex decision-making processes.

"AI employees are assistants to human staff. They help manage public affairs and provide public services," said Luo Gengbiao, director of the digital governance bureau in Shenzhen's Futian District.

However, both experts and the public remain cautious about how data should be used and the boundaries of AI's role.

Decision Makers

Shenzhen's use of AI in government affairs dates back to July 2023, when Futian District launched "Xiaofu," an AI assistant for handling government hotline inquiries.

According to Luo, their AI employees work well gathering public feedback and requests from hotlines and government platforms. "AI employees can quickly generate a daily report of all public requests from the past 24 hours and mark which have been resolved," Luo said.

In Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, residents can now easily follow AI-guided steps to apply for a taxi licence. Zhu Xian, head of the city's digital governance department, told *ChinaReport* that their AI use is mainly answering queries and search services related to government affairs.

Tian Lei, a district-level prosecutor official in Wuhan, Hubei Province, said his office is piloting DeepSeek-based applications, such as working out rulings for similar cases, drafting statements for simple cases, searching for laws and regulations and analyzing evidence.

According to Li Junmin, digital governance department director of Shanwei, Guangdong, the purpose of using AI employees is improving efficiency. Despite the daily volume of hotline calls doubling from 400-500 several years ago to over 1,000, the Shanwei government has not needed to hire more staff. "AI answers the public's questions faster by searching its massive database," he said.

Li Xiaoming, data management director for the digital governance department of Shenzhen's Futian District, added that their AI assistants achieve over 95 percent accuracy in processing paperwork, reducing review time by 90 percent. Li noted that an AI assistant once generated a PowerPoint presentation for him in just 20 seconds, only needing some light revisions.

Ma Liang, a professor at Peking University's School of Government, believes AI will play an even greater administrative role, eventually supporting more complex decision-making.

"Intelligent decision-making may be the most difficult area for AI in government," said Liang Zheng, deputy director of Tsinghua University's Institute for AI International Governance. "In the past, decisions were generally made based on the decision maker's own experience and judgement. But given information limits, decisions were sometimes imprecise. If AI can help the decision-making process with its massive datasets, outcomes could be quicker and better, though achieving that is quite hard," Liang said.

Job Security

Amid the economic slowdown, the growing adoption of AI in government services has sparked public concern. Many worry that AI might replace civil servants just as it has begun replacing workers in many other sectors.

In 2021, Nanchang had over 180 employees handling government affairs. That number has since dropped two-thirds to 60. "As AI technology is applied to government affairs, staffing will continue to shrink," Zhu Xian said, "Some simple jobs, such as answering questions at a reception desk or sorting information from the public and businesses, will quickly be handed to AI."

But Zhu also stressed that not all roles can be replaced quickly. "It takes time for people to adapt to new things. Elderly residents may be unwilling to deal with a cold machine. Meanwhile, humans are needed to deal with complex issues," Zhu said.

Li Xiaoming sees AI as a tool to free human employees to do more creative and face-to-face work. "For example, if AI can efficiently generate legal rulings, human arbitrators can spend more time focusing on the emotional needs of applicants and resolving social disputes more effectively," he said.

However, Liang Zheng warned that even if new jobs are created, they may not be in the same departments or suited to existing employees. "What will happen to people who have spent years mastering jobs that can be done by AI?" he asked, adding that even if employment numbers do not change, structural shifts could affect salaries and social status, and it will take time for people to adapt to these changes.

According to Ma Liang, future recruitment will prioritise applicants qualified to work with or manage AI systems.

Human Interests

As AI enters government departments, where vast amounts of personal data are stored, the public is increasingly concerned about information security.

So far, most local governments operate their AI systems offline, separated from external networks. In Shenzhen, for example, encryption technologies have been adopted to protect data from leaks during transmission or storage.

To avoid offloading responsibility entirely onto AI, Shenzhen has assigned each AI employee a human supervisor, who makes the final decision on each case.

Experts warned that special precautions should be taken for AI applications in certain areas, particularly in resource allocation. "For example, when granting subsidies to the elderly or children, human judgement is essential, as any loophole or mistake could have serious consequences," Liang said.

Tian pointed out that AI still falls short in sentencing recommendations, often making decisions that do not align with the actual situation. "This is because their training data is not enough and also because machines can't grasp social context, like the reasons behind a crime or whether the defendant is a child," Tian said.

In September 2024, Shenzhen's Futian District introduced a framework for managing AI in government affairs, covering ethical guidelines, technical standards, range of applications and safety protocols.

It proposes classifying AI use cases by risk level to guide management, prohibits AI systems from designing or managing other AI employees, and emphasises that AI employees must always act in the best interest of humans and under human command. In addition, it calls for setting up an ethics commission to review, supervise and manage the scientific and moral integrity of each application scenario.

Once refined, this framework should be adopted nationwide, Ma said. ★

AI and Government

Code of Conduct

Effective AI governance is crucial for balancing innovation and risk, says policy adviser Xue Lan of Tsinghua University

By Huo Siyi and Cao Ran

Since early 2025, the emergence of AI has reshaped daily life. Yet while generative AI tools can serve as powerful personal consultants, they often produce misleading or entirely false information that appears highly convincing.

This phenomenon, called AI hallucination, occurs when large language models (LLMs) perceive patterns or objects that do not actually exist, producing outputs that are nonsensical or altogether inaccurate.

AI is also used in scams, including deepfakes, where a person's likeness is convincingly inserted into images or videos.

To address these risks, China issued a new regulation on mandatory labelling of AI-generated content (AGC) on March 14, which will take effect on September 1.

Given the rising complexity of AI-human interaction, it is vital to continually update governance frameworks based on real-world scenarios, argues Professor Xue Lan of Tsinghua University, who also serves as director of the National New Generation AI Governance Professional Committee.

In an interview with *ChinaReport*, he stressed the importance of achieving the right balance between advancing AI technology and managing its risks, and protecting privacy, labour rights and innovation.

ChinaReport: AI hallucinations can have serious consequences, especially in high-stakes fields like medicine and law. As AI becomes more widely applied, how should we address the risks associated with hallucinations?

Xue Lan: Although AI hallucinations can't be completely eliminated as of now, there is significant room for technical improvement. We can reduce the likelihood of AI hallucinations through measures such as improving data quality, optimising model architectures and strengthening system-level controls.

The government should formulate a set of AI safety standards and regulatory systems. Before a large-scale AI system is introduced into real-world scenarios, it is necessary to first test whether the system meets safety requirements. This is particularly necessary in sensitive fields that affect human lives, such as healthcare. Of course, testing standards must closely align with specific application scenarios.

It is crucial to strike a rational balance between the benefits and risks of technology when formulating laws and regulations. For example, in the medical field, if AI's diagnostic accuracy exceeds that of doctors, should decisions be based solely on AI systems rather than allowing doctors to be involved in the decision-making process? If a serious medical error is caused by AI hallucinations, who should be held accountable,

用AI打败AI
Deepfake 深度伪造生成预览

Visitors learn how to use AI technology to identify face-swap scams at the 2024 Inclusion Conference on the Bund, Shanghai, September 5, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

the hospital or the AI developer?

Rather than simply choosing between humans and machines, we should consider human-machine collaboration. Even if the accuracy of AI surpasses that of humans, doctors should still be involved in the final diagnosis. In cases when accountability is unclear, a feasible solution is to provide professional insurance for both AI developers and users [such as doctors].

We can refer to how adverse vaccine reactions are handled. Vaccines play a crucial role in disease prevention and control. However, after vaccination, a very small number of people may experience adverse reactions, which in some extreme cases may result in death. Some countries have established vaccine injury compensation funds to support those affected. For AI applications, technical risk funds or social insurance systems can be set up to prevent developers and users from shouldering the risks alone.

CR: Nearly 90 percent of enterprises deploying DeepSeek do not adopt any security measures, according to Qi An Xin, a Beijing-based internet security and service provider. What are the risks and how should they be addressed?

XL: First, if enterprises do not take measures to address data security issues after deploying large language models, there is a risk of internal data leaks. In particular, some enterprises require large computing resources and have to rely on public cloud platforms. Without security measures, data can be leaked, tampered with or even exploited by competitors.

Second, there are application risks. As mentioned earlier, if there are problems with the data used by an AI system, they may exacerbate hallucinations and even endanger the lives of patients. Therefore, enterprises using open-source large models and targeting mass consumers must take the initiative to formulate higher internal technical review standards and strictly monitor the application of the technology.

CR: What are the core challenges facing AI governance?

XL: An important bottleneck for AI governance in China is the lack of high-quality data. AI needs vast amounts of training data to enhance its capabilities. The more and the better the data, the stronger the system's capabilities become, and AI hallucinations will be less likely.

In China, there are relatively few standardised data service providers. Although the volume of data is large, its quality is rather low. Therefore, constructing a complete and mature data market is an issue that we urgently need to address. The rapid development of the data industry can support large-scale implementation of AI applications.

Another significant challenge is data privacy. In fields like autonomous driving, it is relatively easy to collect data. But in areas like healthcare and education, it is much more difficult.

When it comes to specific application scenarios and personal data privacy issues, all sorts of resistance may be encountered in the process of data acquisition. Striking a balance between data collection and privacy protection is a key challenge for AI governance.

The government holds a large amount of public data covering all aspects of social life, which is of great value for AI training. Currently, the degree of openness of public data is insufficient. As AI becomes more widely adopted, governments at all levels need to consider further expanding data openness on the grounds of ensuring security.

CR: How can we adopt more targeted governance measures tailored to different AI application scenarios?

XL: The interaction between AI and humans is extremely complex. In particular, there is a significant difference between the application of AI in daily life scenarios and its application in industrial scenarios. In industrial scenarios, most of the additional costs caused by AI errors can be anticipated and analysed in advance, making it easier to formulate corresponding solutions. However, in contrast to mechanised production systems, human emotions and responses vary, and the ways people interact with AI systems are diverse. When AI is applied to services involving people, it encounters a great deal of uncertainty.

Professor Xue Lan (Photo Courtesy of the Interviewee)

Take education for example. Using AI in student management is a trend. Some schools have introduced AI classroom behaviour management systems, which observe subtle changes in students' facial expressions through cameras, then judge whether the students are actively engaged. Parents have expressed different opinions on this issue. Some think this infringes on their children's privacy, while others believe it can help students improve academically. Some education authorities argue that as classrooms are public places, privacy infringement isn't an issue. This is a typical governance problem raised by AI in education. It is hard for people to agree on such controversial issues.

Consider another example from the medical field. What if a patient is in a bad mood while describing their symptoms and behaves unexpectedly? Could this lead to a misdiagnosis by AI? Can AI take into account non-medical factors when making diagnoses? These issues all require careful consideration and should be addressed in governance plans.

In the future, we are likely to encounter a variety of complex, unpredictable problems. This is why I have always emphasised a rapid response to governance in the AI era. As applications are rolled out, we should introduce policies and pilot them at the same time. Through this, we can explore and discover new problems before making modifications to improve oversight systems as we go. We should not expect to settle everything all at once. What is more crucial is how to strike an effective balance between technological development, risk management and governance models.

CR: As AI enters its "golden age" and drives higher productivity, there are concerns it will displace workers. How should we manage the unemployment risks posed by large-scale AI adoption?

XL: AI significantly cuts labour costs, particularly in intellectual work, posing a major threat to white-collar employment. If these changes happen too rapidly, they could easily trigger social unrest. Therefore, the government urgently needs to address two key issues: facilitating the stable rollout of AI applications and establishing employment safeguards for vulnerable groups during the transformation.

Take the controversy surrounding Baidu's Apollo Go Robotaxi in Wuhan (which drew complaints from taxi drivers). This highlighted the need for local governments to implement well-crafted policies. These policies should be designed to guide the development of autonomous driving technology and mitigate any potential negative impact on employment within the industry. For example, taxi drivers often decline trips to remote areas. Introducing autonomous driving technology in such specific scenarios can reduce its short-term impact on employment.

Our next step is to innovate in how we govern society to adapt to the social impacts brought by AI. Balancing the risks and benefits of AI requires rational public discussion. The ultimate goal is to reach a broad consensus, not just among experts and government, but across all levels of society. This inclusive consensus will ensure that AI development aligns with the collective interests and values of the entire population.

CR: With AI being implemented on a large scale, what roles do governments and enterprises play in AI governance? How can their cooperation be improved?

XL: When we talk about governance, this term is often interpreted as the government regulating enterprises. But in the field of AI, both the government and enterprises find it difficult to foresee the potential risks that may arise during technological development and application. Their relationship should no longer be the traditional cat-and-mouse dynamic. Instead, there is a pressing need to enhance two-way communication and cooperation, so both can identify and address these risks.

The government should maintain an open attitude and proactively engage and negotiate with enterprises. Companies can also play an important role in AI governance, and take more initiative in self-regulation and flag potential risks to authorities. Some major tech firms are relatively proactive in AI governance. Alibaba and Tencent have established internal AI ethics committees and conduct ethical reviews of their own products.

However, with the widespread adoption of DeepSeek, more small- and medium-sized enterprises are entering the AI space. Whether these smaller players have the capacity to engage in governance and establish mechanisms on par with leading enterprises remains to be seen. In the future, there will be a pressing need to foster consensus on governance at the industry level.

CR: Does this mean we could see a few leading companies monopolise global AI technologies?

XL: Monopolies have always existed in the tech world. For example, the manufacturing of large civilian aircraft is still dominated by a few companies. A similar situation may arise with AI in the future.

However, the emergence of DeepSeek shows that, at least for now, the AI industry still holds great potential for innovation. It is not easy for any single company or country to maintain a dominant position. DeepSeek has also lowered the technological threshold, enabling more enterprises to engage in LLM applications. We can hardly predict the future market landscape.

Of course, technological hegemony and monopoly are issues that require our attention. Currently, there are two main types of regulation when it comes to technology. One is social regulation, which focuses on managing potential risks. The other is market regulation, which involves issues such as dealing with monopoly. As AI has not yet reached large-scale application, AI governance is primarily concentrated on mitigating potential risks to society. But it will be crucial to apply anti-monopoly laws and regulations rationally. If a few enterprises monopolise technology and harm markets or public interests, regulations must be promptly enforced.★

Fishing Industry

Searching for a Safety Net

Facing growing competition from industrial fishing, climate change and new rules, traditional fishing communities in South China are struggling to retain their traditions and connection with the sea

By Wang Yan

An aerial view of Tanmen Port, Tanmen, Hainan Province, February 20, 2023 (Photo by VCG)

Mornings at the port of Tanmen are noisy and bustling, as boats return from distant waters amid the cacophony of buyers selecting and bargaining for the catch. Wicker baskets and polystyrene boxes teem with fish and seafood. Women wearing traditional straw hats sort through the fish by hand.

But on this day in mid December 2024, the port stands silent and idle. For four days, high winds and storms have kept the fleet from setting out. It is another blow to the struggling fishing community, who must deal with climate change, changing tastes, competition from large boats and new conservation rules. Some find it easier to adapt than others, especially the young, who no longer wish to learn the traditions of their forefathers. Community elders fear their culture and traditions are leaking away.

"The days we can go fishing are getting less and less, and we need to go out much further. Fuel costs more and the catches are unpredictable," said one Tanmen fisher in his late 40s, who would not give his name. He was helping his wife dig over a plot of wasteland to grow vegetable in Paigang Village.

Tanmen, with a population around 30,000, comes under the jurisdiction of the city of Qionghai. It is a natural port sheltered from the typhoons of the South China Sea with a long inlet. Boats are moored, one against the other along the quay. Tucked in the southeast corner of Hainan Province, a tropical island in the South China Sea, generations of coastal communities have been dependent on small-scale fishing and harvesting seafood for more than a thousand years.

Family genealogy documents show that fishing activities were already prosperous in the mid-1400s, in the early days of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). It was a vital link in the Maritime Silk Road, when sailors voyaged to Arabia, Africa and beyond.

There are 611 registered fishing vessels now, 521 of which are small (under 12 metres) and stick to coastal waters, and 89 are deep-sea vessels. Among the 3,385 residential village households in the six fishing villages of Tanmen, there are over 3,000 fishers. Another eight villages depend on farming and other activities. In 2024, the total output of marine fishing in Tanmen was 38,615 tons, a steady decrease for five years.

Long Voyages

On days when there is no sailing, it is not only the fishers who lose their income. The women of Tanmen, who support the fleet with work like repairing nets or processing and selling the catch, must turn to work in the insecure gig economy, delivering packages or cleaning restaurants. Others try farming, reclaiming forgotten or marginal land to grow vegetables like taro and beans.

"When I was a kid, my father set sail in a fleet for the Xisha Islands (Paracel Islands) and Nansha Islands (Spratly Islands) to fish, and sometimes the voyage lasted months," Xu Xinhong, 58, told *ChinaReport* on December 13, 2024. The Xisha Islands lie some 200 nautical miles southeast of the Hainan coast, and the distance to Nansha is about double.

Xu grew up in a traditional fishing

family in Caotang Village.

"My mum stayed home, taking care of three children – me, my brother and sister. She worked hard on the collective farmland in the day and worked more at night doing other chores," Xu said. She remembers that when her mum was expecting her father's boat to return, she and the other wives would gather at the shore, scanning the distant horizon where the sea merges into the sky. The most indistinct of silhouettes would send them scurrying to share the thrilling news. "The boats are coming back!"

There is a modern pavilion on the shore near the old harbour in Tanmen. Locals call it the "pavilion of waiting wives," a commemoration of the past.

In 1989, Xu married a young fisher from neighbouring Paigang Village. Her husband Wu Qingwen, 57, started fishing at 16. He still takes to the seas. "It takes our motorboat a day and night to get to Xisha and three days and nights to Nansha," Wu said. "In the 80s and 90s, I went to those faraway places two or three times a year, staying away one or two months." Now, Wu feels he is too old for the arduous journey to Xisha or Nansha, so he stays in his home waters.

When she moved in with her husband in Paigang, Xu managed the household largely alone. Wu was more often at sea than not, except for the summer typhoon season in August. Shortly after the Spring Festival celebrations in late January or early February, he would set sail on a two-month expedition. There would be another from May to June, and more autumn voyages when the weather improved. It was the same pattern every year. Generally, the period from May to August boasted the most favourable weather, with the sea calm and the breeze gentle.

In the decade after she married, jobs were scarce and women's earnings low, around 10 to 20 yuan (US$3-4) a month in the 1990s. Xu farmed a small plot, growing crops like peanuts and sweet potatoes for her family to eat.

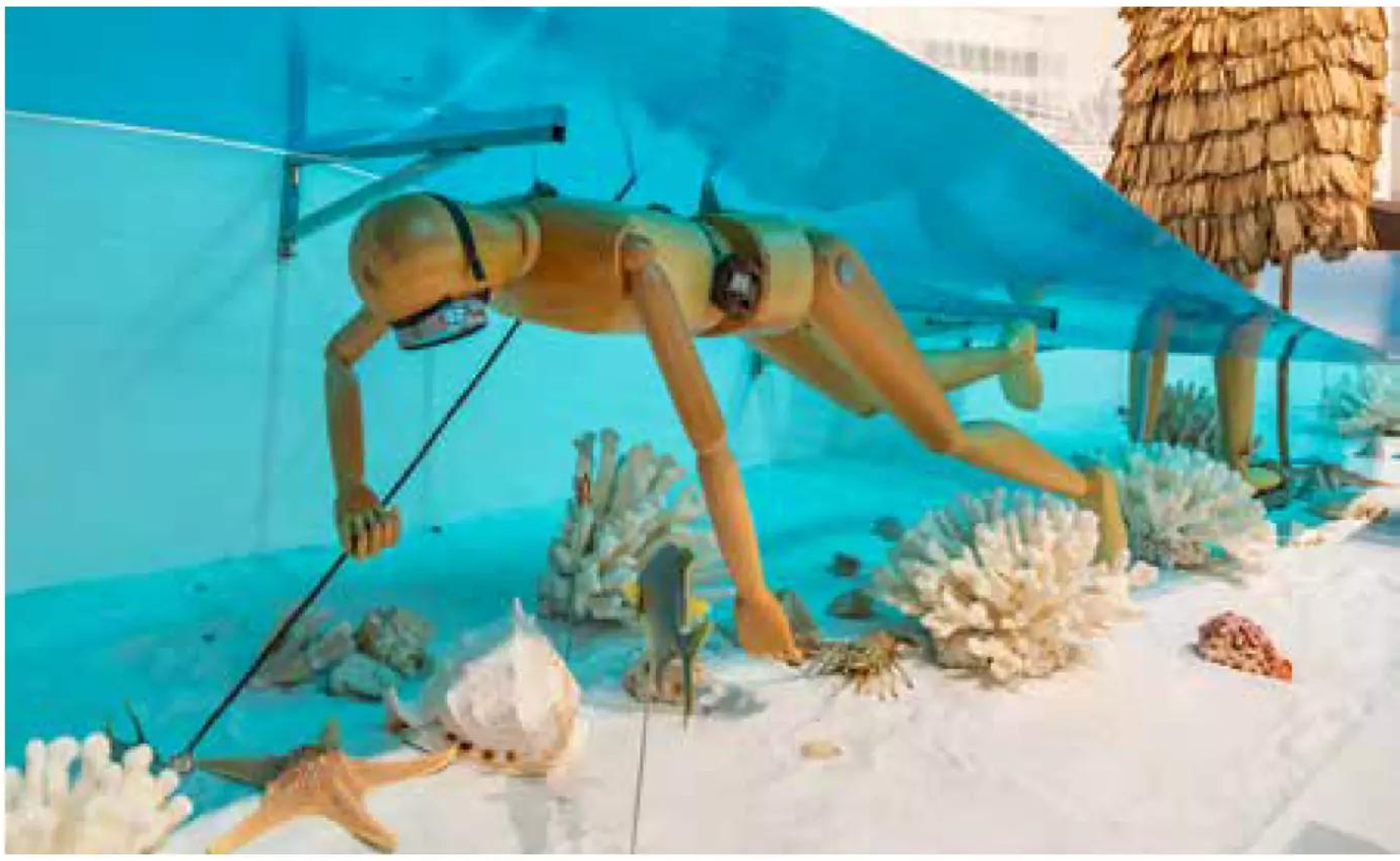
'Living Spirit'

"In Tanmen, middle-aged fishers told me that as long as a boy was in good health, he started going to sea as a teen. Sailing to the Xisha Islands in particular was considered a coming-of-age ceremony for local boys," Pan Hongjin, a media officer from Tanmen Township government told *ChinaReport*. Now although most young people do not go to sea, he feels the culture is so ingrained that it is a "living spirit" that would not take too much to rekindle.

As well as boat handling and navigational skills, Tanmen fishers learn and continue to practise a unique method of reef diving. Wu said he learned it from his father. Using home-made goggles and a breathing tube, he could dive down more than 10 metres. Experienced reef divers can hold their breath for up to five minutes. Tanmen used to have a thriving industry based on deep-sea clams, but now they catch sea cucumbers, lobsters and abalone using spears or just their hands.

According to anthropologist Wang Libing from Xiamen University, Fujian Province, the Xisha and Nansha waters are full of coral reefs, which makes net-fishing impossible. "In the sailing-ship era, without ice-making equipment on boats, they caught sea cucumbers

Fishers unload freshly caught fish at Tanmen Port, Tanmen, Hainan Province, March 18, 2023 (Photo by VCG)



A display shows the traditional reef diving methods of Tanmen fishers, China (Hainan) Museum of the South China Sea, February 20, 2023 (Photo by VCG)

and sea snails which were easier to preserve. After mechanisation, the variety of species increased. Now they fish mainly high-value varieties such as wrasse, grouper and porcupine fish," Wang wrote in an article published by China Blue, a Hainan-based sustainable fisheries NGO on its WeChat account in October 2022.

Now with modern diving equipment and storage tanks on boats, seafood is transported back to port alive. Some vessels can freeze and store marine products on board.

"Tanmen's traditional fishing techniques aren't destructive to the marine ecology since they never adopted trawl fishing. It's a real demonstration of sustainable small-scale fishing," Wang Libing told *ChinaReport* in January.

In the era of sailing ships with no modern mapping technologies, fishers relied on oral instructions or handwritten almanacs. These are known as the *Geng Lu Bu*, or the *Book of Maritime Routes*. Geng means a distance of 10 nautical miles, Lu means routes, and Bu means book. Passed down and added to through the generations, some almanacs are hundreds of years old, and were still in use in the 1990s, despite modern navigational aids. A few Tanmen families guard their copies at home, the pages yellowed with age, while others are exhibited in the local fishing museum.

Zhao Yuqi, a researcher with China (Hainan) Museum of the South China Sea, said that apart from recording sea routes, the almanac records weather conditions, wind directions and ocean currents in different seasons. The *Geng Lu Bu* was included on The Third National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of China by the Ministry of Culture in May 2011.

Riding the Waves

"Hainan regulations state when the wind is above Beaufort force 6, or the waves higher than two metres, fishing boats are forbidden to leave or come back to port," said a 60-year-old woman surnamed Wang in Paigang. Her family owns a small fishing boat crewed by her two sons. However, because of bad weather, they have not been out to sea for over a month.

Tanmen fishers consider waves of up to two metres as small and not dangerous. In certain conditions, it is easier to catch fish than on a calm day. "Sometimes after storms or strong winds, the big waves drive fish in the deep sea to the coast, so it's much easier to catch them. That's why we want to be allowed to fish on certain windy days," Ding Zhile, head of the Tanmen Fisheries Association, told *ChinaReport*. "It's we fishers who really know about the sea."

Local fishers say the best time to fish in the deep-sea is from March to June, before the summer typhoon season. But in 1999, China imposed an annual moratorium on fishing in the South China Sea during the fish breeding season for conservation purposes. It starts on May 1 and ends on August 16 in waters north of 12 degrees latitude. More recently, nationwide regulations to licence new boats were tightened even more. In Tanmen, the number of fishing vessels has been the same for the last five years.

"Some species and marine animals [such as Napoleon wrasse, giant clam and green turtle] are listed as endangered so it's forbidden to catch or sell them according to national law, and declining fish stocks is making fishing even harder. This year life is particularly challenging for us," Wang said. Many others in Paigang Village agree.

She feels uncertain about the future, and wonders if it would be better to get some land to farm. But most of the limited village farmland was sold to real estate developers over a decade ago.

Vendors sell freshly caught fish and seafood at a bustling morning market, Tanmen Port, Tanmen, Hainan Province, August 24, 2014 (Photo by VCG)

Fishing vessels remain docked due to poor weather conditions, Tanmen Port, Tanmen, Hainan Province, December 13, 2024 (Photo by Wang Yan)

Climate change has caused more extreme frequent weather events and makes life more difficult for fishers. Studies show that rising water temperatures can shift the geographical distribution of fish species, alter reproductive timing, and reduce the availability of suitable habitats. There are more violent storms and unpredictable weather, like Super Typhoon Yagi in September 2024, one of the most destructive storms to hit Southeast Asia in recent years.

Environmental Concerns

According to Climate Risks to Fishing Species and Fisheries in the China Seas, an article published in the international journal *Science of the Total Environment* in January 2023, "considering the water temperature in the 2010s, 20 percent of fish species in the China Seas have one-fourth of their habitats unsuitable, and the situation will become worse with future warming scenarios in the 2050s when nearly half of species will have at least one-fourth of their habitats no longer suitable."

Extreme weather was particularly destructive to Hainan's fishing and aquaculture industry in 2024. "Typhoon Yagi destroyed fish farming rafts set up by Tanmen fishers, which caused the loss of many high-value live fishery harvests," Wang Xiuhong from the Qionghai Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Affairs told *ChinaReport*.

To encourage fishers to abide by the seasonal ban and other regulations to protect fisheries, Hainan government started offering subsidies in the early 2020s. Vessels that stick by the rules, are eligible for a minimum annual subsidy of 9,000 yuan (US$1,231). Depending on the length of the vessel and its equipment, compensation for lost fishing days can reach 300,000 yuan (US$41,444) per year.

Moratoriums do work. Research on the Bohai Sea, published in journal Highlights in *Science, Engineering and Technology* in February 2024, found the moratorium there had enhanced species diversity, stabilised the marine ecology and guarantees utilisation of fishery resources.

In 2022, the central government published the 14th Five-Year Plan for Fisheries Development, pledging to build on the achievements of the previous plan, which from 2016 to 2020 had reduced the national fishing fleet by 40,000 vessels.

Based on national regulations, the government will continue to dynamically adjust fishery resources, including limiting the number and area of fishery licences, implementing quotas, and enforcing seasonal fishery closures. It also supports the modernisation of small fishing vessels while strengthening supervision. In Hainan, with central government financial support, provincial authorities offer substantial subsidies to upgrade equipment on vessels, Wang Xiuhong said.

"Now our government discourages us from fishing, and with strict quotas for fishing vessels in Tanmen, it's only possible to reduce the number of boats rather than registering any new ones for [commercial] fishing purposes," Ding Zhile said.

Happy as Clams

According to both Wang Xiuhong and Pan Hongjin, apart from offering direct subsidies to help fishers find new livelihoods, authorities organise training programmes in coastal communities. This includes starting their own mariculture projects, seafood restaurants, guesthouses and recreational fishing, or helping them find work in agrifood processing plants.

Xu Xinhong's son, Wu Shuxian, 34, has attended training sessions on guesthouse management, seafood e-commerce and recreational fishing. "I benfitted a lot from these courses organised by the township or the city. They provided guidance to those unfamiliar with these new types of business," Wu Shuxian said.

It has been a roller-coaster ride for Tanmen's fishers. A few decades ago, when there were almost no rules, it was a boom time. Han Han, founder and CEO of China Blue, told *ChinaReport* that from the 1980s, domestic markets for red coral, tortoise shell and giant clam surged, but this caused irreversible damage and species collapse.

Almost every family in Tanmen was involved in the clam business, from gathering to processing to selling trinkets and jewellery to tourists. Authorities promoted it as an important industry.

Between 2010 to 2015, one fisher could earn as much as 200,000-300,000 yuan (US$27,446-41,169) from giant clams. So, when the government suddenly banned catching giant clams and selling products made from their shells in 2017, it caught fishers and the Tanmen government by surprise. Around 100 stores closed overnight.

After the ban, Tanmen's fishers had to make do with regular fishing and seafood gathering. But in the last three years, e-commerce has provided a lifeline, creating a vibrant domestic market for fresh marine fish products such as groupers and parrotfish.

When times were good in the early 2010s, many families built new two-storey houses. As fishing income declined, authorities started pushing tourism. Many residents converted their homes to guesthouses. In 2017, Fu Minglin, now 44, renovated an old house in his hometown of Shiwan Village, becoming one of the first people to run a B&B in Tanmen.

With government support, he set up a fishing cooperative of around 40 members. They invested 3 million yuan (US$408,248) to buy the sea use rights for a 12-hectare area near the old port for marine tourism, including a restaurant, leisure fishing, boat hire, scuba diving and eco-tourism. "We welcomed our first tourists in 2023, and the total investment is about 10 million yuan (US$1.4 million) which includes development funding from our village committee," Fu said. The project offers jobs for female villagers as receptionists, cleaners and gardeners.

Top: Xu Xinhong tends her vegetable plot in Paigang Village, Tanmen, Hainan Province in December 2024

Above: Tanmen entrepreneur Fu Minglin stands in front of his beachside eatery on a blustery day, Tanmen, Hainan Province, December 2024 (Photos by Wang Yan)

Fu told *ChinaReport* the project generated net profits of 1 million yuan (US$140,000) in 2023. But the tourism industry has struggled in 2024 due to bad weather, and so has his recreational fishing project, which was already affected by a shortage of fish, Fu said, standing in front of his blue-and-white seafront café, mocked up like a boat. It is open, but there are few customers.

It is not all doom and gloom. In 2020, with central government ecological recovery funds, Qionghai government started building artificial reefs off Tanmen to help marine life recovery.

"As these man-made habitats attract fish, they provide economic benefits as fishing grounds for commercial and recreational fishers, or as scuba dive sites," he said. Preliminary monitoring has seen an uptick in fish stocks.

Fu's projects have brought positive change to communities, providing alternative livelihoods as well as inspiring some young people to come back from the cities.

Wu Shuxian resigned from his government job in 2020, and with the aid of a government grant of 100,000 yuan (US$13,734), he opened two guesthouses.

Previously economically marginalised women have been brought into employment at inns and guesthouses. Sun Qiyuan, 31, works as receptionist earning 3,000 yuan (US$409) a month. She is grateful for the tourism development, which enables people to stay and work in the community and reduces their dependence on fishing.

In 2023, Wu Shuxian set up a small cooperative with five friends, all in their 30s. They ship frozen fish and shrimp around the country through social media platforms. In 2024, Tanmen government invested in five new fishing vessels for the recreational fishing market. The cooperative has a contract to rent and operate them this year.

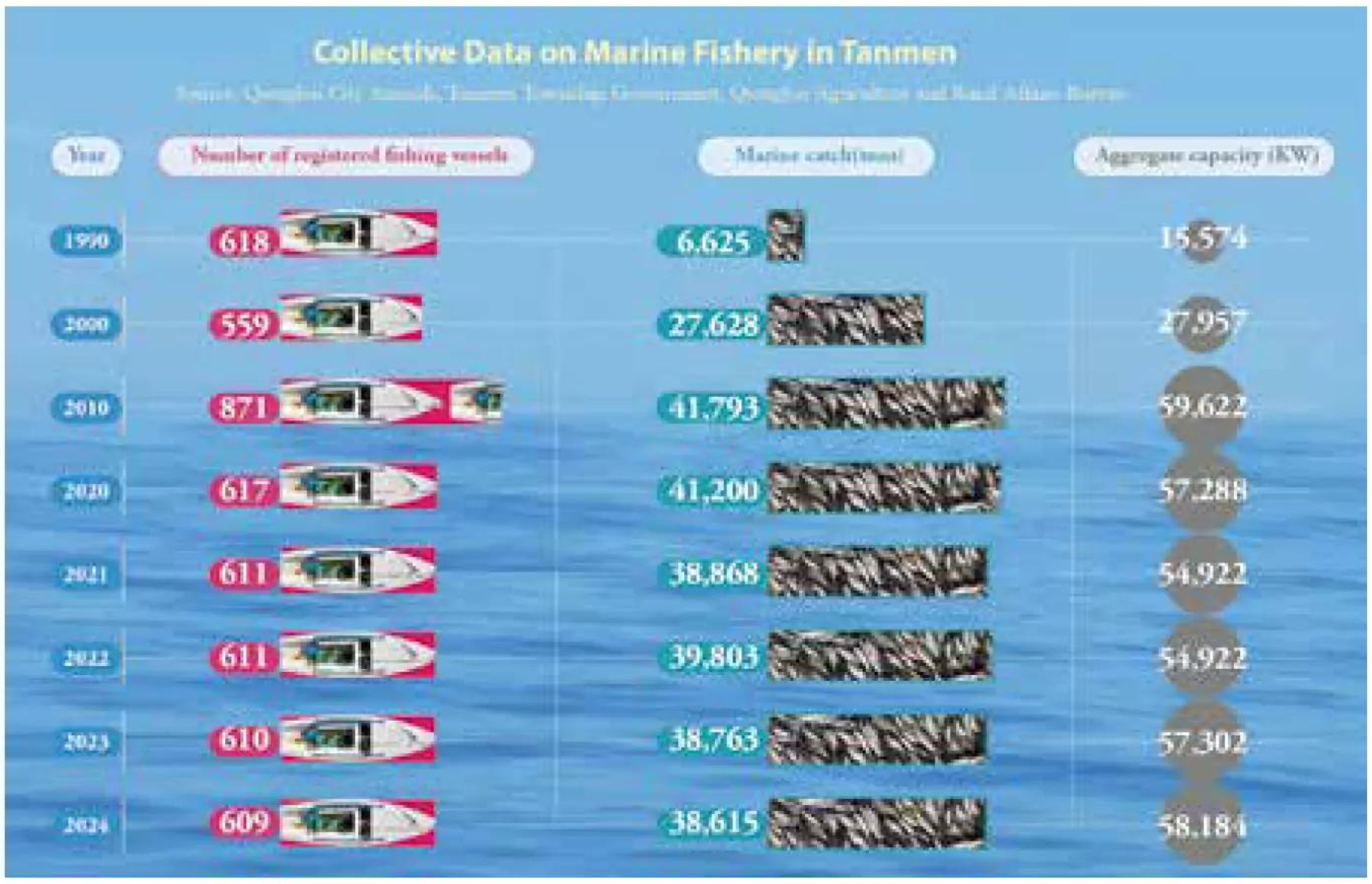
"A two-hour trip costs 1,580 yuan (US$217) with a maximum nine tourists. Our best scenario would be combining tourism with fishing activities in different seasons to maximise the profits, but it's unlikely due to the strict rules on boat use," he said. Fishing and recreational boats require different licences that are not easy to obtain.

Han Han from China Blue said while there are policies to help fishers transition to alternative sea-based livelihoods, the red tape is off-putting. "For example, the rules say you can't convert fishing vessels for recreational fishing, so you have to build a new one. That costs millions of yuan, a big stretch for most locals," Han said.

But Fu still believes that overall, recreational fishing will provide a better income and lower the impacts on marine resources, a more sustainable livelihood than conventional fishing.

Less Fishers in the Sea

According to statistics released by the Fisheries Administration Bureau, there were an estimated two million small-scale fishers and 81,289 small-scale marine fishing vessels in China, representing 64.26 percent of the total



Collective Data on Marine Fishery in Tanmen

Source: Qionghai City Annals, Tanmen Township Government, Qionghai Agriculture and Rural Affairs Bureau

marine fishing vessels.

Young people have more choices now, so few choose the labour-intensive fishing industry. The cultural inheritance has stopped with the older generation. "Shiwan Village where I live has 450 people, but only one person under 30 goes out to sea to fish," Ding Zhile said. He remembers that until the early 2000s, villagers went to sea after the Spring Festival, and the streets were empty and silent. It is too uncertain now as fish stocks decline and prices fluctuate.

"Modern technology has replaced the *Geng Lu Bu*, but the cultural experience and local knowledge can never be replaced, so young generations who grew up in urban areas away from the ocean won't be able to inherit it," Ding said.

Other skills are lost too. Only women in their 50s and 60s can weave and repair nets. Han Han believes the hundreds of years of collective wisdom is a precious asset that should be kept alive.

Many experts agree that small-scale fishers' knowledge is invaluable, and their environmental impact is relatively small compared to modern industrial trawling, which can be very destructive. Xavier Basurto, professor of environmental social sciences at Stanford University told *ChinaReport* in February that local fishers' knowledge, "which has been fine-tuned through years and years of interactions with the aquatic environment, is key to finding solutions to a more sustainable relationship between humans and nature."

Basurto said the most pervasive threat small-scale fishers face is invisibility. In China, farming and marine cultures are often marginalised, and they suffer from "policy invisibility." He suggested that community-based co-management of coastal resources be strengthened, empowering fishers to participate in decision-making processes that directly affect their livelihoods, increasing the likelihood that solutions will be maintained over time.

Qionghai city government spends hundreds of thousands of yuan a year training fishers to work in manufacturing or seafood processing, Wang Qiuhong said. But many are reluctant to work in rigid environments after the freedom of being their own boss. One young fisher surnamed Yang said he would rather drive a cab.

William Cheung, professor and director of the Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries at University of British Columbia in Canada, said that alternative livelihoods such as tourism and aquaculture are limited to location, and typically require a different set of skills and knowledge, not to mention capital to manage finance, customers, advertising and marketing. It is not a transition all can make. "Those are not easy skills for them [fishers] even if you provide resources. Often only a small proportion of fishers can successfully transition to alternative livelihoods," Cheung told *ChinaReport* in March.

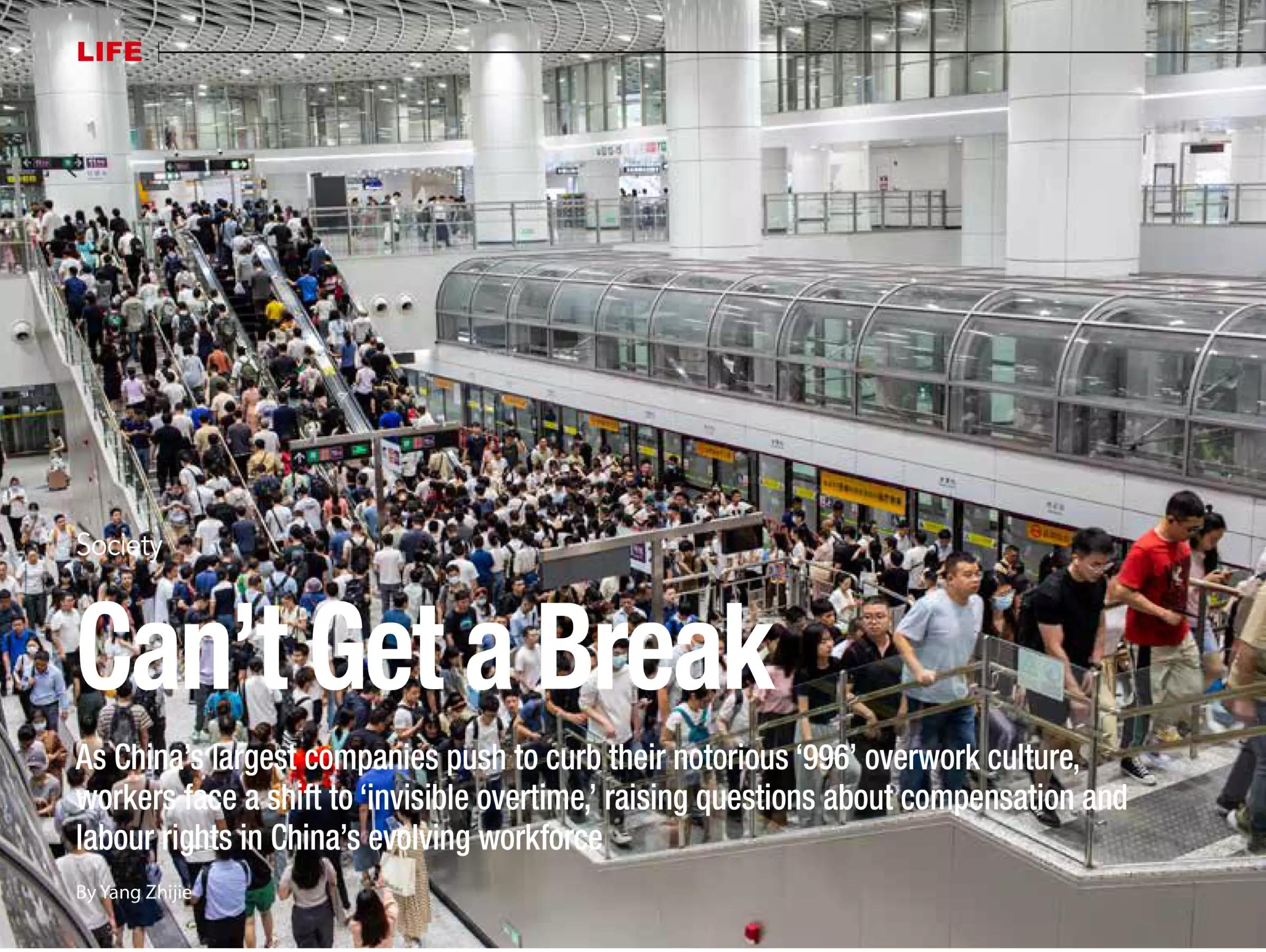
The run of bad weather and economic slowdown has hurt tourism. Xu Xinhong and her husband Wu Qingwen help their son Wu Shuxian with the guesthouse. But with business slack, Wu senior is back at sea. "I go out near the reef in the early morning and return in late afternoon. I usually get great wrasse, grouper, large yellow croaker and porcupine fish, and I sell them as soon as I get back to port," he said.

December to early March is the best time for mackerel, which migrates back to Tanmen's coastal waters in late winter and early spring. A delicacy for locals, they can sell it for around 250 yuan (US$34) a kilo. The mackerel harvest has been pretty good this year.

Now average incomes are lower. residents told *ChinaReport* that fishers can make around 30,000-40,000 yuan (US$4,109-5,579) a year, but if they own a guesthouse, they may earn 100,000-200,000 yuan (US$13,699-27,397), if tourism is good.

"Fishing is the fundamental means of livelihood amid the fast changing social and market environment. Local communities are the experts of the sea," Wang Libing said. "Despite their ups and downs, they can keep a sense security as long as they have their ancestral seas in the vast South China Sea to fish in as freely as before."

"My early ancestors, my grandpa and my father spent their whole lives fishing. The only difference is the way we fish. My grandfather fished on a sailing junk, my father on wooden motorboat, and I may captain a yacht. I don't think we'll lose our fishing culture. Of course, we may change our ways, we can share our traditional scuba diving methods, our unique cultural heritage with visitors," Wu Shuxian said.★



Society

Can’t Get a Break

As China’s largest companies push to curb their notorious ‘996’ overwork culture, workers face a shift to ‘invisible overtime,’ raising questions about compensation and labour rights in China’s evolving workforce

By Yang Zhijie

Commuters crowd a subway station during morning rush hour, Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, June 24, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

DJI Sky City, a pair of twin skyscrapers home to China’s leading drone manufacturer, DJI, is a landmark in Shenzhen’s Nanshan District, its asymmetrically suspended glass blocks giving the complex a distinctly futuristic feel.

Housing around 8,000 employees, DJI’s headquarters used to keep the lights on late into the night. Like many other tech companies in China, DJI was notorious for its grueling work hours, with employees frequently staying past midnight.

On February 27, the company implemented a new rule aimed at curbing its overtime culture. All employees are now required to punch out by 9 pm. At that time, human resources remind staff leave, ensuring no one stays at their desks. DJI’s Shanghai office enforces this rule even more strictly, turning off all the lights at precisely 9 pm.

Other Chinese companies have followed suit in combating the notorious “996” culture prevalent at China’s tech companies – working from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week.

Appliance giants Haier and Midea have introduced similar policies: Haier enforces a strict two-day weekend, while Midea requires employees to clock out by 6:20 pm.

However, being forced to leave the office does not necessarily mean less work. Many fear that these policies may simply make overtime more invisible and harder to define, with employees still needing to finish tasks at home, without overtime pay.

Lights Out

“It’s almost like they’re forcing us to go home. The new policy has been carried out quite thoroughly,” a Shenzhen-based DJI employee, who requested anonymity, told *ChinaReport*.

“The funny thing is, I’ve never seen the subway so crowded at 9 pm before. Now everyone’s rushing home. It’s almost like a fire drill,” he added.

For DJI, one of the key reasons behind the new compulsory off-duty policy is cost optimisation. According to *The Economic Observer*, DJI has implemented a series of cost-reduction measures since the beginning of 2025. For example, the campus' in-house gym, swimming pool and badminton courts have been closed. Taxi reimbursements for late-night overtime have been discontinued, and staff activity funds have been slashed.

An anonymous department manager at DJI told *The Economic Observer* that in January, the company set a clear goal to increase efficiency by 20 percent in 2025. "We have to figure out how to eliminate unnecessary work and meetings, improve internal communication and reduce working hours," he said.

Midea, which is headquartered in Foshan, Guangdong, also made headlines on March 10, when the hashtag "Midea Mandates Employees to Clock Out by 6:20 pm" topped the trending list on Sina Weibo.

Midea's Vice President Zhao Lei told *ChinaReport* that while there is no written rule requiring employees to leave at 6:20 pm, the company has implemented a policy since 2025 to simplify work procedures, improve efficiency and curb overtime.

Zhao elaborated on the long-standing efficiency issues at Midea. "Many departments used to hold meetings very late, often after 6 pm. Also, employees struggled with 'overtime shame,' where as long as superiors stayed late in the office, subordinates were reluctant to leave, even if they'd finished their work."

"Such unnecessary work wasted resources and time," Zhao said. "If it continued, it would inevitably increase company costs."

Since 2025, Midea has banned meetings after work hours and reduced unnecessary overtime. However, the company has not mandated that employees leave the office at 6 pm. The goal, Zhao emphasised, is to encourage employees to work more efficiently during regular working hours.

Not all employees are happy with the new mandatory off-duty policy, as many fear it will reduce overtime benefits and lower their income.

In the past, tech companies provided benefits as overtime compensation. The anonymous DJI employee said the company used to offer free dinner at the canteen after 6:30 pm, shuttle buses were available after 7:30 pm and the in-house gym was free to use at night. Taxi fares were reimbursed for those leaving after 9 pm.

Since the new policy was introduced, some DJI employees have complained on social media: "Although we have to leave by 9 pm, the amount of work remains the same. I'm always anxious that I won't finish work on time," a DJI employee posted to RedNote under the username Kalalote on March 11.

A Midea employee told *ChinaReport* that in the past, those who worked overtime were compensated with time off and extra year-end bonuses. Now, with Midea strictly limiting overtime, those benefits are no longer offered.

Culture Shift

Fan Wei, an economics professor at the Capital University of Economics and Business in Beijing, has closely observed China's '996' culture in tech companies for years. He told *ChinaReport* that in recent years, social attitudes towards '996' culture have drastically changed.

Before 2019, China's working class had a relatively neutral view on overtime. "They generally accepted working longer hours for more pay," Fan said. However, in recent years, society has become increasingly critical of '996' culture and excessive overtime.

Fan noted that many companies now require employees to remain logged in to the Office Automation system 24/7, with managers expecting workers to respond to tasks outside regular hours. "If this situation persists," Fan warned, "leaving the office means nothing, and overtime work becomes almost invisible."

Last year, two deaths from overwork on the same day sparked heated online discussions about excessive overtime in tech companies. On June 17, 2024, a 38-year-old senior test engineer at China's leading AI company, iFlytek, died from overwork at home in Hefei, Anhui Province. On the same day, a researcher at the Shenzhen branch of Shopee, the Singaporean e-commerce company, collapsed and died in the office.

Following the incident, an employee from Shopee told *Jiupai News*, "We usually have to work until 10 pm without overtime pay. Even when we do work overtime at night, we don't get a day off. Only if we work until 3 or 4 am can we rest for half a day. But generally speaking, our situation is still better than that of employees at other tech companies."

On July 30, 2024, the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee held a meeting in which it for the first time highlighted the need to reinforce industry self-discipline to prevent "vicious 'rat-race' competition." On December 12, 2024, the annual Central Economic Work Conference again emphasised the need to address the issue and regulate the behaviour of local governments and enterprises.

However, many working in tech industries argue that in such a fiercely competitive market, it is nearly impossible for companies not to join the rat race.

Zhou Qi, a human resources professional at a Beijing-based company engaged in online to offline commerce, explained how fierce market competition has made overtime almost inevitable since 2023. "In this situation, it's impossible not to work overtime," Zhou told *ChinaReport*.

Late-night meetings have become routine at Zhou's company, many of which he arranges. "For example, if I want to arrange a 10-person meeting, I check everyone's schedule, and they are usually only available around 8 pm. If you want to meet during the day, you need to book at least a week in

压力那么大
快来尖叫吧!

An office worker shouts into a giant megaphone at the 2024 Stress Relief Festival, Changsha, Hunan Province, September 7, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

advance," Zhou said. "But many meetings are very urgent, and it's unrealistic to arrange them so far ahead."

An employee at Tencent shared his experience with *ChinaReport*: In recent years, his department implemented a "Healthy Day" policy, where one day a week, all employees must leave the office punctually at 6 pm. "But neither the total workload nor our key performance indicators (KPIs) have changed. If you haven't finished your work during the day, you have to work overtime at home," he said.

Invisible Overtime

Continuing work through apps after working hours has become increasingly prevalent, and is a common form of invisible overtime, especially in China's internet and tech companies. This practice really took root after the Covid-19 pandemic, when people became accustomed working from home.

But according to economics Professor Fan Wei, "996" culture will eventually be phased out. The more stubborn issue is preventing invisible overtime during off-hours, which is much harder to define and more difficult to guarantee reasonable compensation for.

Although excessive overtime has drawn public attention in recent years, employment laws and regulations are inadequate. Existing laws prohibit excessive overtime, but penalties are ineffective, Fan said.

According to the 2004 Regulation on Labour Security Supervision, when an employer violates labour laws or regulations by extending employees' working hours, the company receives a warning, is ordered to make corrections and may attract fines of between 100 yuan (US$14) and 500 yuan (US$69) for each affected employee.

"Even when authorities find that companies have violated labour laws, the penalties are too weak to serve as a deterrent. Therefore, companies lack motivation to make fundamental changes," Fan told *ChinaReport*.

In March 2024, during the CPC National People's Congress, delegates proposed additional legal protections for employees who have to continue working online after office hours.

Lü Guoquan, a delegate to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and head of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, stated that invisible overtime has become normalised thanks to the internet. He proposed that the country establish a legal definition and compensation framework for "working overtime online."

"Being always online has trapped workers in the work system, negatively affecting their physical and mental well-being," Lü told *The Workers' Daily*.

Chinese courts have weighed a number of cases involving online overtime payments in recent years. But legally defining what constitutes "invisible overtime" remains difficult.

In 2024, the Supreme People's Court reviewed a case that set a new precedent. A director of a Beijing-based technology company surnamed Li sued her employer for unpaid overtime after work. She claimed she communicated with clients and colleagues on messaging apps such as WeChat and DingTalk during off-hours and requested extra payment for her time. The company meanwhile argued that this did not qualify as overtime.

Beijing No. 3 Intermediate People's Court ruled that the time Li spent on work-related messages during her time off should also be "considered" when calculating overtime compensation. Recognising the duration, frequency and content of her communications, the company was ordered to pay Li 30,000 yuan (US$4,120) in overtime pay.

The ruling introduced "performing substantial work" and "obvious occupation of time" as criteria for defining invisible overtime.

The case garnered widespread public attention, with experts calling it a step forward in protecting workers' rights in the evolving labour landscape.

However, Fan pointed out that there is still a long way to go, from clarifying what invisible overtime entails in individual cases to defining clear legal provisions that can guide future rulings.★

Law

Room for Privacy

New regulations make hotels accountable for hidden cameras in rooms, marking China's first legal move to protect guests' rights. However, experts are keeping a close eye on how it's enforced

By Xie Xuewei

Soon after checking in to her room, a young woman surnamed Dang stretched a cord over the length of her bed and draped a sheet over it, creating a makeshift canopy.

"There are so many news stories about hidden cameras in hotel rooms, so that made me feel safer," Dang told Guangzhou-based *Yangcheng Evening News* in February.

Though an issue for years, remote voyeurism involving wi-fi enabled spycams in budget and luxury hotels alike is increasing as equipment gets cheaper and channels to distribute videos continue to grow – all while authorities play catch up.

At the end of 2022, a young man surnamed Yao and his girlfriend discovered a hidden lens installed in the bottom of the television in their Yubo Boutique Hotel room in Luoyang, Henan Province. By the time the police extracted it, it had already sent a dozen videos through its wi-fi connection, according to Henan-based media outlet *City Report* in early 2023.

On April 1, new national regulations covering public camera management took effect, prohibiting the installation of cameras in hotel rooms. People found to have installed hidden cameras face a maximum 10,000 yuan (US$1,361) fine, while hotels can be slapped with up to 20,000 yuan (US$2,722). In cases where surveillance devices cause "severe consequences," violators may also face criminal charges.

The law addresses a previous gap in privacy protection in public places. While China's Civil Code requires hotels to safeguard the interests and rights of guests, it does not specifically address hidden cameras, making it difficult to hold violators accountable.

Liu Xingliang, president of the China Internet Data Centre, a third-party research institute and data platform, told *ChinaReport* that the new regulation highlights the importance of protecting individual privacy and personal data rights.

In September 2024, when Li Hua gave a hotel in Baotou, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region a bad review online and posted a video after spotting a hidden camera in her room, the hotel sued her for defamation.

The hotel demanded that Li delete the video, issue a public apology and pay 10,000 yuan (US$1,361) in damages. However, when police became involved several days later, the hotel changed its tone, saying that the camera had been installed without their knowledge, the *Qilu Evening News* reported. The hotel later withdrew its lawsuit.

Top and above: Visitors search for pinhole cameras in a hotel room exhibit at the Cyber Security Science Museum, Zhengzhou, Henan Province, August 21,2023 (Photos by VCG)

Some places have begun taking action. On February 1, Guangdong became the first area in the nation to hold hotels responsible for such cases with its new Regulations on Security Administration of the Hotel Industry, explicitly requiring them to ensure their rooms are free of any surveillance devices.

"The legal provision has filled the legal gap that failed to define and underline the hotels' responsibilities when guests' privacy is infringed on by surveillance devices installed in their rooms," Peng Chun, an associate professor at Peking University's School of Law, told *ChinaReport*.

"With the new law, victims at least know who to sue, even though we have to wait to see what the outcome of these regulations will be," Peng added.

Dots in the Dark

Upon arriving at their Luoyang hotel, a woman named Chen Lin was told the room she had booked – a single queen – was unavailable. Instead, she was moved to a themed suite with a round bed.

Intuitively, she turned off all the lights.

Sweeping the room with her smartphone's camera app, she noticed three flickering red dots coming from the ceiling smoke alarm.

Chen immediately checked the room's wi-fi and detected three additional devices using the same router. Frightened, she contacted hotel staff. They denied any knowledge and assured her that voyeurism was an impossibility. After demanding a refund but being told she would only receive half, Chen called police.

As it was midnight, police were short staffed and unable to confirm if the three dots were in fact cameras. They urged Chen to come to an agreement with the hotel, she told *ChinaReport*.

"Actually, smoke alarms are usually where micro cameras are installed," a homestay manager surnamed Xie told *ChinaReport*. "The red flickering lenses can be well masked by what appears to be the alarm's normal functioning," he said, adding that luxury and themed hotels are often targeted for hidden cameras.

In the first nine months of 2024, lawsuits involving the illicit production and sales of professional spycams and surveillance equipment soared by 436 percent year-on-year, according to China's Supreme People's Court. It did not reveal the total number of cases.

Ranging in price from tens to thousands of yuan, wi-fi equipped micro cameras capable of recording hundreds of days of video are readily available on major e-commerce platforms. Many lenses are easily installable in common hotel room items like tissue boxes, smoke alarms and shampoo bottles.

"You can get a panoramic view of what happens in the bathroom," an online vendor told *ChinaReport*, touting their product's inconspicuous design. The product cost 580 yuan (US$80).

According to Gao Yandong, associate professor at the Institute of Digital Rule of Law at Zhejiang University, cameras in hotel rooms generate two profit streams for those who install them.

One is illegal live webcasts, which are priced between 400 and 600 yuan (US$55-82) and often involve three to five hidden cameras for multiple views. The other is edited footage, which sells for 100-300 yuan (US$14-41) per video to platforms and up to 100 yuan (US$14) to individuals.

"With many customers and multiple sales of one video, a team using more than 100 cameras can rake in six digits in a month," Gao told *ChinaReport*.

Do Not Disturb

The widespread trade in illicit hotel surveillance videos stems from lenient and ambiguous legal penalties. Under 2024's amendment to the Draft Law on Administrative Penalties for Public Security, fines for snooping, eavesdropping and personal privacy violations were raised from 500 yuan (US$69) to 1,000 yuan (US$137). However, detention remains capped at just 10 days.

"The penalties are too weak," Gao Rui, an attorney at Guangdong Qifu Law Firm, told *ChinaReport*.

China's Criminal Law allows imprisonment for those who profit from producing and distributing obscene materials, but it does not specifically address installation of hidden cameras in hotels. Also, only offenders whose actions cause "severe consequences" face jail time for at least three years.

"The phrase 'severe consequences' is too vague for the judicial system to assess the severity of the crime," Gao said.

In response to growing concerns over hidden cameras in homestays and hotel rooms and the hospitality industry's reluctance to eliminate them, Guangdong began to implement its provincial rules two months before the national law went into effect.

Now, hotels and homestays must ensure their rooms are free of surveillance devices. Many hotels purchased detection equipment weeks before the law took effect, the *Guangzhou Daily* reported on January 16.

"You can easily detect if there are micro cameras in hotel rooms. There are only a few places in a tidy room where a lens can be hidden. So, with the right skills, a thorough search takes a few minutes," He Zhihui, who runs a camera detection firm in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, told *ChinaReport* in 2022.

But not all hotels welcome the regulation. "At some hotels, the people behind these devices have accomplices among the staff who help reposition the cameras," Xie said.

Sweeping for hidden cameras is also costly, as detection tools fall into three categories.

Infrared light detectors are the cheapest costing up to 200 yuan (US$28), but they have larger margins of error. Signal detectors scan for wireless transmissions but require expertise to distinguish spycam signals from other devices. The most effective and user-friendly, thermal imaging devices cost between 3,000 yuan (US$410) and 10,000 yuan (US$1,370), making them unaffordable for many hotels, Xie said.

"Because of these costs, hotels can't check their rooms every day. But without regular checks, spy cameras can be installed at any time, as hotel guests are too transient to monitor," He Zhuhui told *ChinaReport*.

Some hotels also worry about potential liability issues.

"If penalties are imposed in a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, hotels may be held accountable for matters beyond their control, which seems unfair," a member of the Guangdong Hotel and Lodging Association told *ChinaReport* on condition of anonymity.

"Not all detection tools can find hidden micro cameras, particularly those designed with anti-detection features," Deng Aimin, director of the Wuhan-based Research Institute of Tourism at the Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, told *ChinaReport*.

"Since hotel surveillance crimes involve multiple offenders, including camera sellers, installers and sometimes hotel staff, measuring the appropriate penalties for each is complicated," Deng added.

According to Xie, hotels that carry out regular inspections, create traceable check-in records and cooperate with authorities when cameras are discovered should not be held accountable.

Focus on Rights

Experts argue that amendments to multiple laws such as the Criminal Law and the Civil Code are needed to make enforcement more effective.

Beyond refunds, Gao said compensation for privacy violations should also cover emotional distress, though quantifying such damages is challenging.

"One of the simplest and most direct ways is to increase penalties," Peng said, arguing that privacy violations should be an explicit crime in the Criminal Law and the police should crack down on the entire illegal industrial chain.

The regulation requires that local police set up a security inspection system for the hospitality industry, ensuring regular oversight of security measures.

However, hotel industry insiders who spoke with *ChinaReport* said that police had never conducted room sweeps for spy cameras.

According to Gao, police, market supervisors and tourism authorities should introduce more detailed regulations, such as standard procedures for detecting and removing hidden cameras and a list of recommended detection equipment. According to the new national law, businesses face fines or risk having their licence revoked if their failure to detect surveillance devices results in "severe consequences."

Meanwhile, Deng proposed requiring real-name registration for micro camera purchases, along with stricter laws on manufacturing.

The anonymous hotel association member went further, suggesting that the government licence the production of surveillance cameras.

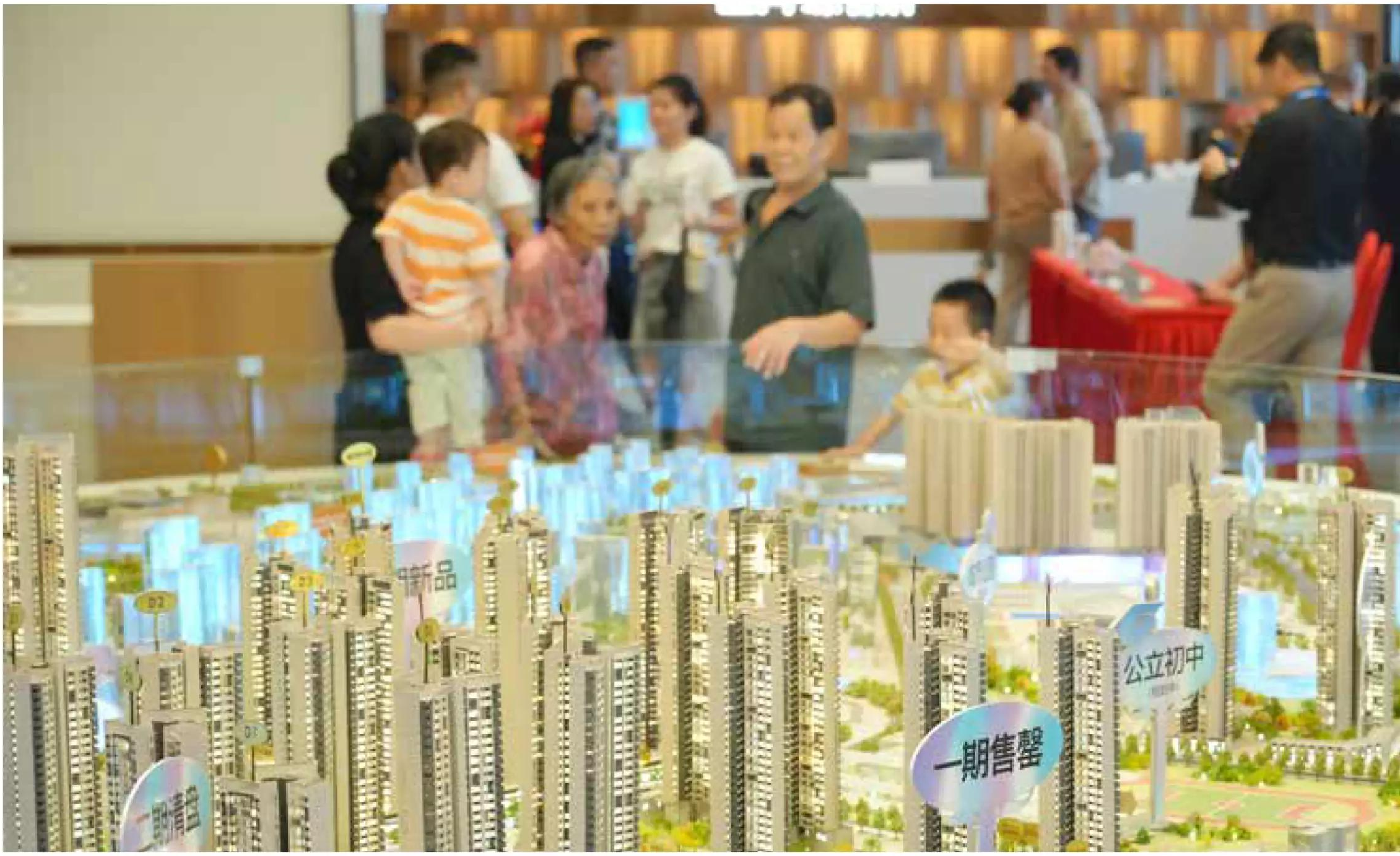
"If production of surveillance cameras isn't regulated, all other rules will just be empty talk," he said.★

Real Estate

Home Stretch

Facing significant challenges in acquiring and repurposing unsold homes, some cities are turning empty flats into student dorms, hospitals, retirement housing and resettlement homes

By Li Mingzi


新品
公立初中
一期售罄
一期清盘

Over the past few years, the Chinese government has been battling a major real estate meltdown as economic slowdown has weakened demand. To address the problem, China has adopted a new housing model that emphasises supplying more affordable residences to meet the needs of lower income earners.

Following the release of a central government guideline in August 2023, local governments and State-owned enterprises have been encouraged to purchase unsold properties and turn them into public housing. By repurposing the country's bloated inventory of unsold flats, the government is seeking to stabilise the real estate sector while addressing housing shortages for certain groups.

During the annual National People's Congress held in March, the government pledged to give city governments more autonomy on how they buy unsold homes, such as deciding the acquisition price and future usage. This marks a broader shift in policy flexibility in tackling the ongoing decline in the real estate sector, which has long served as a major driving force of China's economy.

Potential homebuyers visit a sales office for a real estate development, Huizhou, Guangdong Province, June 15, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

Flat Solutions

Some cities had a head start in experimenting with approaches. At Chenjian Shui'an residential community in Wuhan, capital of Hubei Province, construction is underway to convert 352 unsold flats into dormitories that will soon house 2,800 Hubei University students.

Located in the city's suburban Yangluo District, the Chenjian Shui'an development marketed 980 units as luxury residences with premium interiors and panoramic views. However, since its completion in 2023, only 25 units found buyers.

The turning point came in December 2024 when Hubei University reached a deal with the project's developer, Wuhan Construction Group, to purchase 352 units at an average price of 4,650 yuan per square metre – 40 percent off the original listed price.

The deal is widely considered a win-win: the university solves its chronic student housing shortage at a discount, while the developer gets a 1.98 billion yuan (US$273m) cash injection.

"This deal breaks the previous model where local State-owned enterprises (SOEs) could acquire existing commercial housing only for public housing," said Wu Jing, director of the Hang Lung Centre for Real Estate at Tsinghua University.

"Such approaches offer new perspectives for housing acquisitions that align with this year's policy direction," Wu said, "A more flexible housing acquisition policy will help address various problems we've seen in the past."

Some 500 kilometres to the northeast in Zhengzhou, capital of Henan Province, a different but equally successful model is underway. Zhengfa Jiayuan Meiyu development – originally built as luxury flats by publicly listed developer China Resources Land – now houses 2,380 young professionals in meticulously refurbished units that rent for about 30 percent below market rates.

Ma Yueqiao, a 29-year-old graphic designer, was among the first tenants when he moved into his 30-square-metre studio in November 2023. "The transformation has been remarkable," he says, gesturing towards the bustling courtyard below his window. "When I arrived, this area felt like a construction site – unfinished buildings, dust everywhere, no amenities. Now we have proper grocery stores, delivery stations and even an EV charging station," Ma told *ChinaReport*, "It's become a real neighbourhood."

This is one of many similar projects in the city. As of January 2025, SOEs backed by Zhengzhou government had acquired 96 housing projects, comprising 125,000 units, the highest acquisition volume nationwide. This includes 63 apartment projects with 86,000 units for working professionals, with an overall 99 percent occupancy rate.

Incentive Mismatch

Despite some successes, the programme faces significant obstacles in many cities, as developers are reluctant to cut deals.

"When repurposing acquired homes into subsidised housing, the SOEs as buyers aren't required to turn a profit, but they can't operate at a loss either, which sets high standards for the properties they purchase," said Li Yujia, chief researcher at the Guangdong Urban Rural Planning and Design Research Institute. "In first-tier cities, properties that meet such criteria face no shortage of buyers, while projects in areas with weak demand or leftover unsold units from scattered developments fail to qualify," he told *ChinaReport*.

While subsidised housing is sold or let typically at 40-50 percent below market price, SOEs must negotiate steep discounts from developers, which further dampens real estate developers' enthusiasm.

"Many of these properties are held by publicly traded developers who prefer gradual sales as long as they don't face cash flow crises. If they were to sell at heavily discounted prices, they would have to immediately disclose their substantial losses on corporate balance sheets," Li said, "The result is that these companies lack incentives to participate."

Wu stressed the regional mismatch between supply and demand. While demand for subsidised housing is primarily in first- and second-tier cities, most unsold commercial housing inventory targeted for acquisition is concentrated in third- and fourth-tier cities.

"Despite many cities expressing support for the acquisition initiative, the actual volume of purchases has been limited and fallen short of expectations," Wang Yeqiang, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and deputy director of the National Laboratory for Future Cities, told *ChinaReport*.

In May 2024, the People's Bank of China, China's central bank, announced a 300 billion yuan (US$41.2b) relending facility to support the government-subsidised housing project.

According to Huatai Securities, by the end of November 2024, approved loans for implemented projects were about 43.5 billion yuan (US$5.9b), accounting for only 14.5 percent of the total relending quota. Excluding the 41.2 billion yuan (US$5.6b) in deals already sealed in eight pilot cities before May 2024, newly implemented financing had been as low as 2.3 billion yuan (US$320m).

Building No.5 of the Chenjian Shui'an development, which is to be converted into dormitories for students at Hubei University, Wuhan, Hubei Province (Photo by CNS)

New Keys

The central government has granted local authorities more autonomy in dealing with property inventory, hoping they will explore new acquisition and utilisation models.

Experts believe that one of the most effective applications of unsold inventory is to provide housing for displaced residents in urban village redevelopment and historic neighbourhood renewal projects. As these projects once relied on time-consuming new construction, purchasing existing unsold homes offers a faster, more cost-efficient alternative.

Some local governments have already put it into practice. In Guangdong Province, the city of Foshan provided residents displaced by suburban village development projects with multiple options, including property exchanges, cash compensation or a hybrid approach. Ten pre-existing housing communities were offered as relocation options, seven of which were repurposed from existing inventory.

In Luoyang, Henan Province, officials introduced even more progressive measures. The city's 2025 work plan released on March 11 includes 19 urban village redevelopment projects and 110 neighbourhood renovations. More importantly, Luoyang has implemented a "purchase instead of build" policy that introduces three novel approaches: housing vouchers, voluntary purchase programmes and bulk acquisitions. The new model utilises existing housing stock to meet resettlement needs, a significant shift from traditional construction-based solutions.

Considering that many local governments are deploying such tools to stabilise falling property markets and facilitate the recovery of the real estate sector, the new approach could simultaneously speed up redevelopment projects and reduce housing inventory.

Another application targets elderly care. With China's ageing population creating unprecedented demand for senior citizen housing, converting unsold properties into care facilities presents a practical solution.

Hainan Province is pioneering this approach. In March, the provincial government launched a three-year (2025-2027) action plan to develop a "healthy ageing industry." A major highlight is reusing vacant residential properties for elder care purposes, provided they meet safety and operational standards.

In Wuhan, where unsold flats are being transformed into university dorms, the city government is trying to replicate the model in the health sector. In February, Wuhan No.6 Hospital started expanding its Panlong District branch, which involves buying 32 floors of the Tianzongcheng Enterprise Centre, a mostly empty commercial building. With a 1 billion yuan (US$137m) investment, the building will be renovated into medical facilities, including outpatient, emergency and inpatient departments, with a planned capacity of 500 beds.

These trials of repurposing unsold properties for public amenities open the door for non-real estate developers or non-State-owned businesses to become potential buyers. By exploring alternative ways to acquire and repurpose unsold properties, local governments aim to leverage this inventory to address social problems like eldercare and healthcare.

In the meantime, the central government has pledged to strengthen financial support. In October 2024, China's Ministry of Finance proposed using special-purpose bonds to purchase unsold commercial properties as subsidised housing, with officials currently finalising implementation details. The initiative gained further momentum in this year's government work report, which pledged 4.4 trillion yuan (US$606b) in local government special bonds, including funds specifically earmarked for buying excess housing inventory.

"Expanding local autonomy creates testing ground for new solutions," said Wu Jing, "The special bonds are designed to set these innovative models into motion."

He cautioned, however, that programme success hinges on balanced supply-demand dynamics, noting that all approaches, whether conventional or experimental, will require navigating complex market realities.★

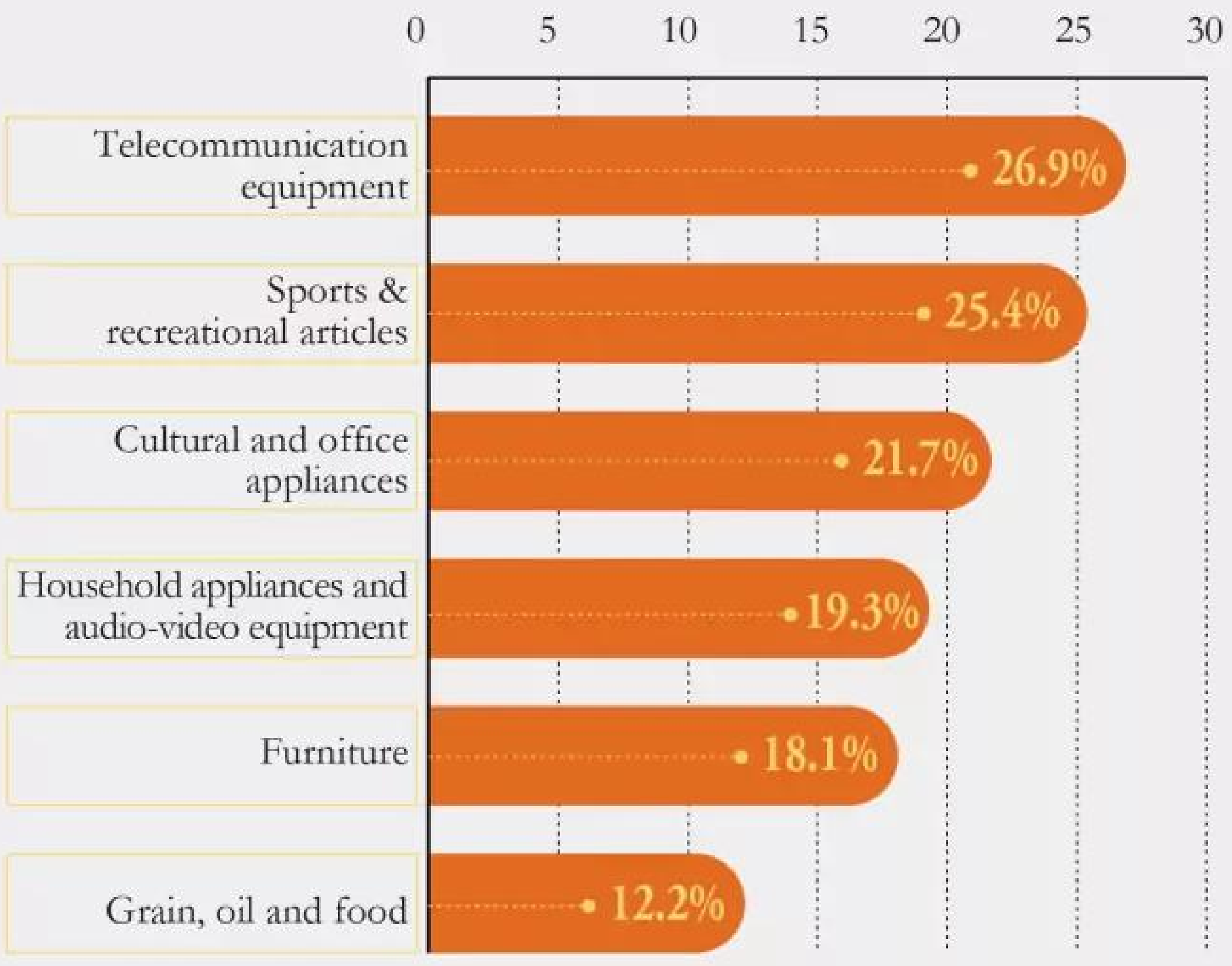
China By Numbers

5.9%

Year-on-year rise in total retail sales of consumer goods in March, totalling 4.09 trillion yuan (US$559.8b)

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

Consumer goods with the fastest growth in retail sales in March

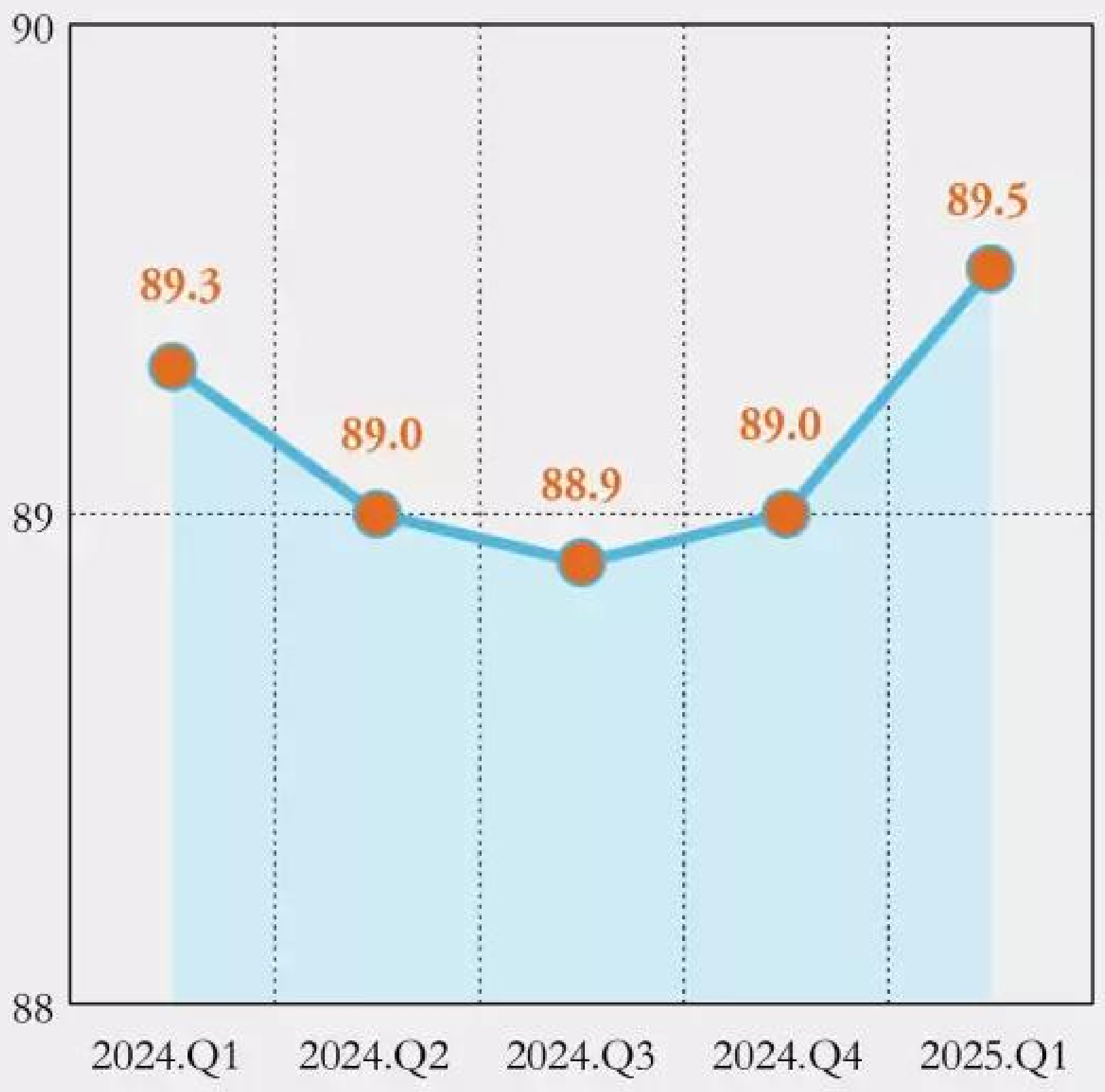


89.5%

The small- and medium-sized enterprises development index in Q1 2025, a rise of 0.5 points over Q4 2024

Source: China Association of Small and Medium Enterprises

SME development index between Q1 2024 and Q4 2025



32%

Year-on-year rise in the issuance of Panda Bonds, yuan-denominated bonds issued by overseas institutions in the Chinese onshore market, by foreign-invested institutions and companies in 2024, reaching nearly US$28 billion

Source: People's Bank of China

5.8%

Year-on-year rise in imports and exports of China's private enterprises in Q1 2025, totalling 5.85 trillion yuan (US$800.58b), accounting for 56.8 percent of China's total import and export volume

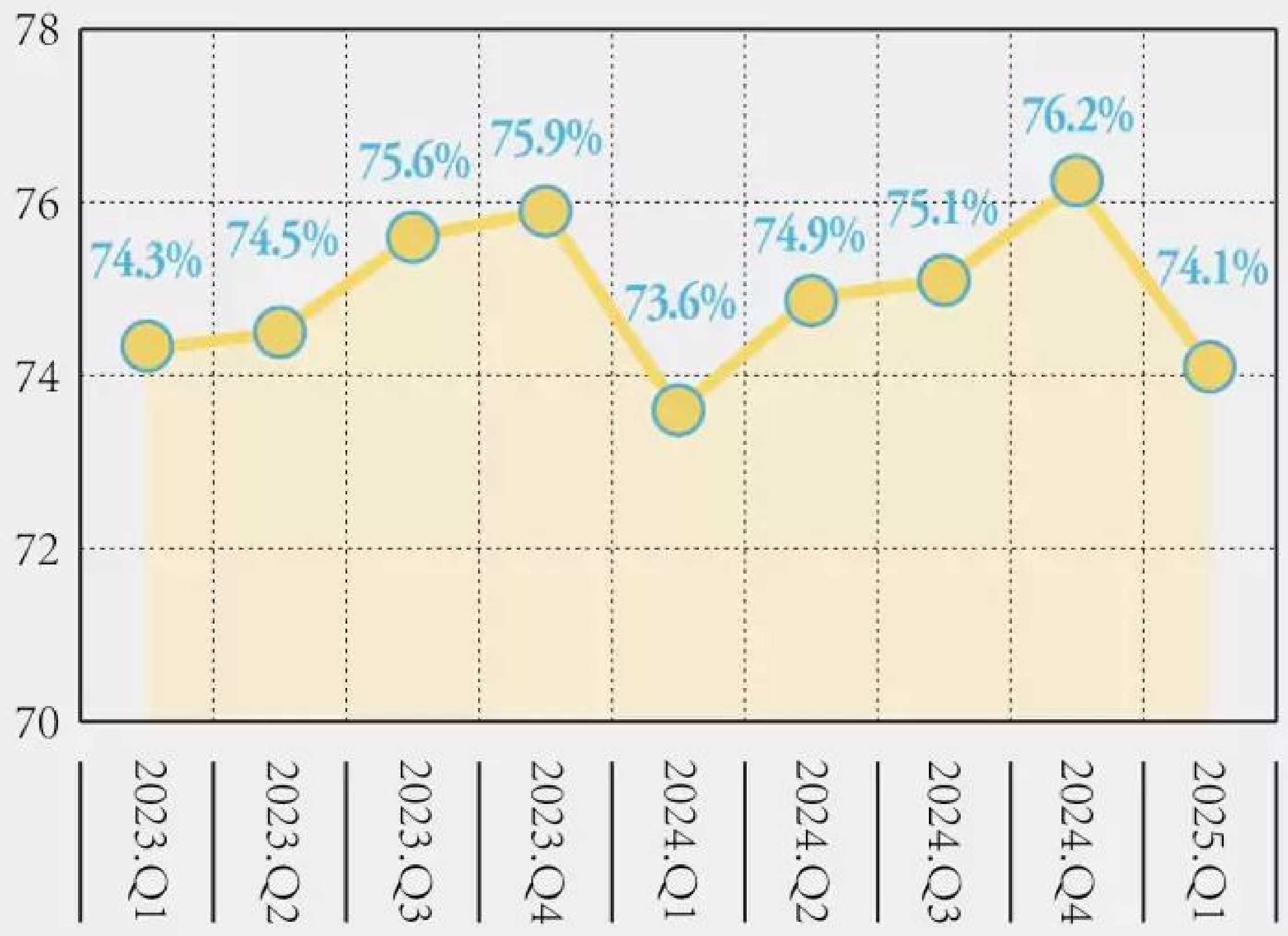
Source: General Administration of Customs of China

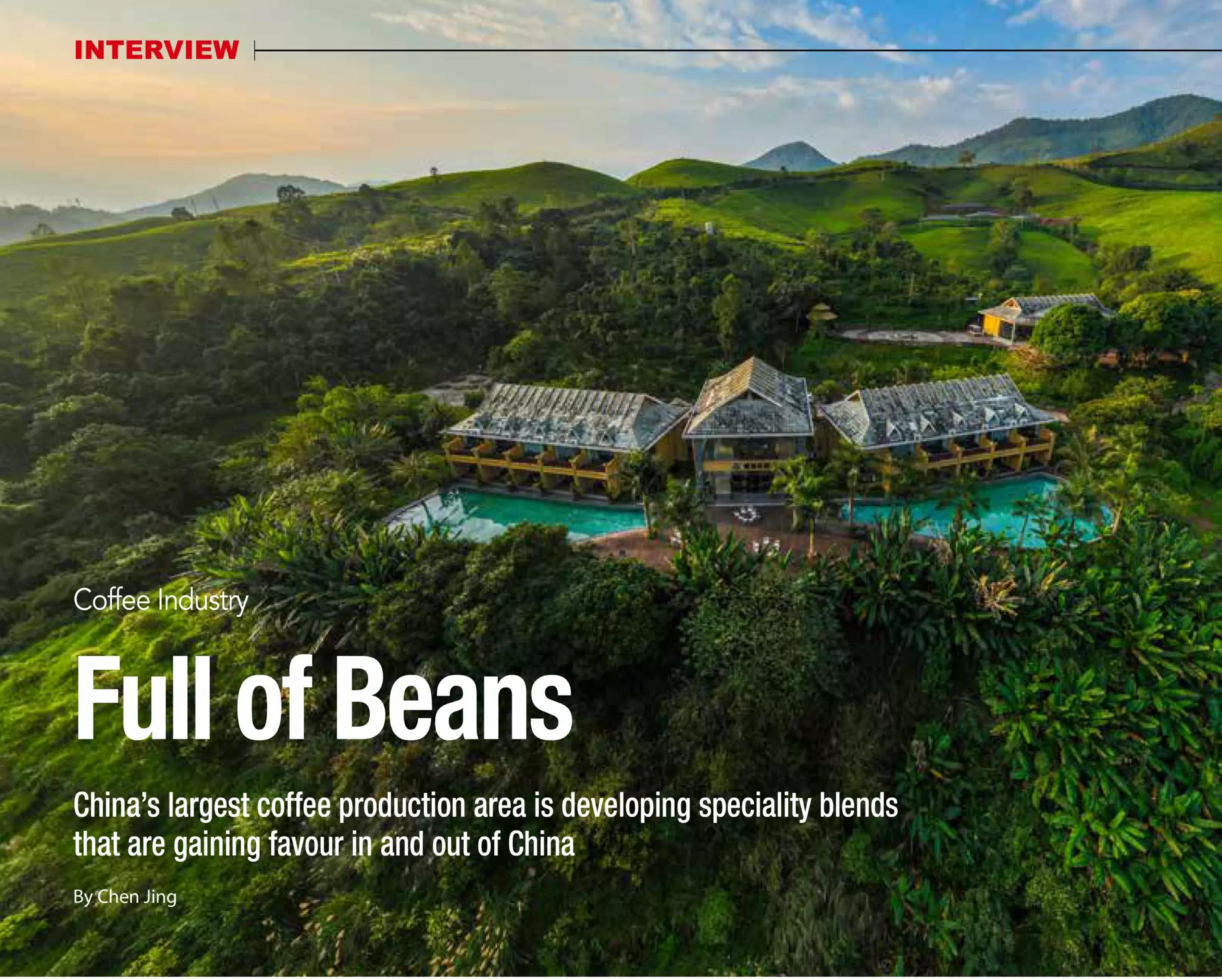
74.1%

China's industrial capacity utilisation rate in Q1 2025, 0.5 percentage points higher than the same period of 2024

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

China's quarterly industrial capacity utilisation rate





Coffee Industry

Full of Beans

China's largest coffee production area is developing speciality blends that are gaining favour in and out of China

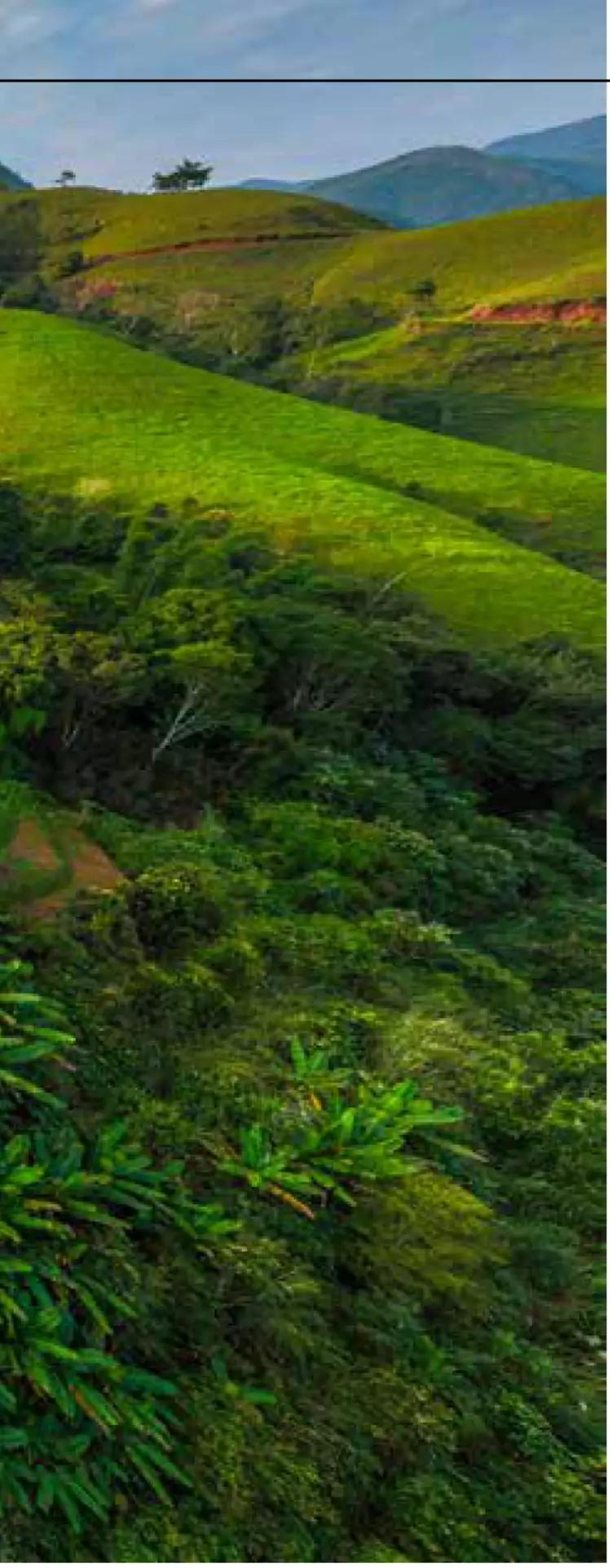
By Chen Jing

Coffee consumers tasted a bitter storm in their cups in 2024. Beans were trading at their highest level in December 2024 since 1977 due to extreme rainfall and droughts in the world's two biggest producers, Brazil for Arabica and Vietnam for Robusta beans. Although prices slipped a bit recently, analysts expect high prices to continue in 2025, including the sustained impact of last year's bad weather in Brazil and Vietnam and higher tariffs imposed by the US.

In China, coffee has become a very popular beverage, particularly among young consumers. Several major international and local brands, including Starbucks, Nestlé and Luckin, use coffee beans from Southwest China's Yunnan Province, which has long been known for its tea and flower industries. Yunnan produces more than 98 percent of coffee beans in China, according to the provincial agriculture and rural affairs department, with output in 2024 totalling 150,000 tons. Customs data shows that Yunnan exported 32,500 tons of coffee in 2024 to 29 countries and regions around the world, including the Netherlands, Germany and the US, a staggering 358 percent year-on-year increase.

Coffee was introduced to Yunnan in the late 19th century, but large-scale plantations did not start until the mid-20th century. The main variety is Catimor, a hybrid of Arabica and Robusta. It is known as Xiaoli (small grain) in Yunnan. Since 2022, local speciality coffee varieties called Yunka (Yunnan coffee), which feature distinctive fruit or floral aromas, have been developed based on Catimor.

In an interview with China News Service, He Feifei, associate professor at the School of Agriculture, Yunnan University and executive director of



A coffee plantation in Pu'er, Yunnan Province, December 18, 2022 (Photo by VCG)

the non-profit organisation Speciality Coffee Society of Yunnan, shares her views on the history and development of the coffee industry and culture in the region.

China News Service: How was coffee introduced to Yunnan? And how did this southwestern province become a world-leading coffee producer?

He Feifei: Coffee is a hugely popular drink across the world, but the coffee tree is generally believed to have originated in Ethiopia, and it then spread to other continents due to colonial expansion, cross-border trade and personnel flows. In 1884, coffee tree seedlings were brought to China's Taiwan region by British traders, before they were introduced and planted in Yunnan's Ruili and Binchuan, Hainan Province's Wenchang, Fujian Province's Xiamen and other places. Among the several versions of Yunnan coffee's origin story, the academic community tends to favour the record (kept at a national coffee germplasm bank in Ruili) that residents of the Jingpo ethnic group in the border area of Ruili first cultivated coffee that was brought from Myanmar in 1893. (A widely circulated version is that French missionary Alfred Liétard, whose Chinese name is Tian Deneng, brought seeds from Vietnam and planted Yunnan's first coffee tree in Zhukula Village in Lijiang in 1892 or 1904.)

China's coffee industry started in the 1950s. In 1952, returning overseas Chinese from Malaysia set up a collective farm for coffee cultivation in Xinglong on Hainan Island. The same year, in Yunnan, experts from the Institute of Tropical and Subtropical Cash Crops under the Yunnan Academy of Agricultural Sciences brought coffee from the border area of Dehong to Mang City, half of which was introduced to Lujiangba in Baoshan City, and gradually started coffee cultivation on a large scale. In 1958, Baoshan Arabica coffee made its way to the London market and was rated as a "first-class product." In 2023, China overtook the US as the country with the most branded coffee shops in the world. From 2010 to 2022, China's annual per capita coffee consumption tripled to 0.5 kilograms per person (according to the International Coffee Organisation).

Both located on high plateaus, Yunnan and Ethiopia share diverse and vertical climate conditions, making them among the most ideal regions for coffee cultivation on the planet. In the early 1990s, Nestlé launched a coffee plantation programme in Yunnan, becoming one of the first foreign companies to enter China after the country's reform and opening-up (which started in the late 1970s).

With proactive support from the provincial government, Yunnan's coffee industry has grown rapidly, with the emergence of multiple leading enterprises and brands in coffee planting and processing in China. In 2023, Yunnan's coffee planting area and output both accounted for more than 98 percent of the national total. Over recent years, as Yunnan seeks to develop speciality coffee, many of its coffee beans have been clinching awards in international competitions, making this production region increasingly known to the world.

CNS: As one of the world's major beverages, coffee is more than just a commodity. What role does it play in cultural exchanges and personnel flows?

HF: The circulation of coffee has obviously promoted cultural exchanges and personnel mobility across borders. It has a long industrial chain that stretches from planting, processing, roasting, packaging and brewing, to sales, branding and so on. As the coffee flows, so do workers, technical standards and development ideas along the whole industrial chain. For example, after spreading to Yemen, the Ethiopia-originating Arabica coffee took on a deep chocolatey flavour, due to the region's diverse cultivation environment, arid climate and post-harvest exposure to sunlight. Since the Yemeni port of Mocha was an important commercial port on the Red Sea, businesspeople travelling to and from the port named this coffee after the Yemeni port, which is now often used to refer to a latte

People attend the China (Kunshan) International Coffee Fair for Coffee Industry 2024, May 16, 2024, Kunshan, Jiangsu Province (Photo by VCG)

People visit a coffee fair during the Dianchi East Coast International Coffee Culture Carnival, where about 100 coffee trucks from 24 Chinese cities and Southeast Asian countries gathered, Kunming, Yunnan Province, August 18, 2024 (Photo by VCG)

drink with chocolate sauce.

For example, professional bean hunters have emerged in the coffee industry, who travel across the world's coffee bean producing regions and coffee plantations in search of high quality beans. Chinese coffee chain Luckin launched a "Global Bean Hunting Initiative," organising visits to the world's three renowned producers: Ethiopia, Panama and Indonesia, as well as a visit to Yunnan in March 2024. Here, coffee serves as a medium of cultural exchange, promoting cultures and customs across countries and regions.

Not only that, cafes are a place for socialising. Caffè Greco in Rome, which hosted Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, among other literary giants, is a must-visit for tourists.

Therefore, industrialised development and circulation of coffee has not only brought strong impetus to economic development, but also formed a unique coffee culture around the world, as well as promoting exchanges and mutual learning between peoples.

CNS: How has China's coffee culture evolved over the years?

HF: I have relatives who grow coffee in Lujiangba, Baoshan City, one of the major coffee-producing areas in Yunnan. When I visited in the early 1990s, those who drank coffee did not use coffee utensils. They simply put ground coffee into boiling water and brewed it intuitively, with no idea about brew ratio and brew time. They used gauze for a filter. Although it smelled good when it was brewing, it tasted bitter, so a lot of sugar had to be added. In those days, China's coffee farmers grew coffee only to sell beans, and did not have the habit of drinking coffee.

The formation and development of China's coffee culture is closely related to the rise of China's economy. In the 1980s, Nestlé introduced Nescafé 1+2 instant coffee sachets in China, which marked the beginning of modern China's coffee market, as well as many Chinese people's awareness of the beverage. Since the start of the 21st century, with China's burgeoning economy and rising standard of living, instant coffee could no longer satisfy consumers' growing demand for coffee quality, as they began to consciously pursue better tasting coffee.

Thanks to the region's superior natural conditions, Yunnan coffee is characterised by its distinctive complex flavour of being full-bodied yet not bitter, aromatic yet not overpowering, with a subtle fruity acidity. With strong encouragement from the government, Yunnan has embarked on the path of developing speciality coffee, with standard production processes applied across the entire chain, from cultivation to processing. It is fair to say that out of China's coffee producing areas, Yunnan is the one that has the most complete industrial chain and pretty solid development.

Interestingly, China's coffee culture varies greatly in different production and consumption areas. In Yunnan,

People relax at a coffee house in a field, Xiangyang, Hubei Province, April 1, 2025 (Photo by VCG)

most coffee-producing areas are home to ethnic groups, which boast rich and colourful cultures, and have artfully integrated coffee into daily life. We can drink coffee in a Dai ethnic group's bamboo hut, buy coffee in flower and vegetable markets, eat speciality dishes made from coffee leaves and flowers, and enjoy creative coffee with local delicacies such as black truffles and *ru shan* (a type of rolled fried cheese made from whey.

In its main consumption areas – cities, a wide variety of trendy and sophisticated independent coffee shops have become icons of urban life. There is an array of coffee shops offering co-branded products and developing "new Chinese-style" coffee made with traditional ingredients such as tea and soya milk. From all these cultural expressions of coffee in China, it is clear that Chinese people have, through their traditional approach of openness and inclusiveness, breathed new vitality into coffee and its culture, endowing them with a unique brilliance.

CNS: What are the trends of China's coffee industry and coffee culture, and how will this influence Africa and the world's coffee industry?

HF: First of all, China brings a huge global coffee consumption market. China's coffee market totalled around 265.4 billion yuan (US$36.3b) in 2023, with a compound annual growth rate of 17.14 percent over the past three years. The market was expected to hit 313.3 billion yuan (US$42.9b) by the end of 2024.

Many overseas coffee-producing countries place high value on the Chinese market. Brazil, for instance, exported 422,000 bags of coffee to China in 2022, and this number surged to 1.5 million in 2023, an unprecedented growth for the Brazilian coffee industry.

At the same time, China's coffee industry is enjoying prosperous development in its drive to develop speciality coffee, with every segment of the industrial chain moving towards standardisation and refinement, while becoming increasingly competitive on the global scene.

Against this backdrop, it is a mutually beneficial and a win-win choice to cooperate with overseas coffee production areas. Africa, for example, boasts rich coffee germplasm resources, and it is in need of a broad consumer market.

Currently, I am participating in a project jointly conducted by China and Ethiopia on coffee weather index insurance product design, preference analysis and policy effect evaluation, and the research results will benefit both countries.

Yunnan could carry out germplasm resource cooperation with other coffee producing regions, develop coffee varieties with better traits and help promote sustainable development for the global coffee industry.★

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Folk Culture

The Young Woman and the Sea

She began as a coastal protector. Today, Mazu the sea goddess is a global icon of Chinese heritage, linking millions worldwide through faith, memory and maritime culture

By Du Guodong

On March 29, 2025, the first day of the third month in the Chinese lunar calendar, the "Mazu's Return to Her Ancestral Home" ceremony was held at the Mazu Ancestral Temple on Meizhou Island in Putian, Fujian Province, Southeast China. More than 110 Mazu cultural groups from China and abroad, along with nearly 10,000 guests, gathered to celebrate the grand event.

Mazu was originally named Lin Mo, born on Meizhou Island in 960. According to legend, she was exceptionally intelligent from a young age, well-versed in astronomy and a strong swimmer. She was known on the island for helping sailors, fishers and merchant ships in distress at sea. At 27, she perished while attempting to rescue the survivors of a shipwreck.

Due to her repeated divine interventions at sea, she came to be revered as the sea goddess. Mazu's birthday is believed to fall on the 23rd day of the third lunar month (which arrives on April 20 this year), a time when believers from around the world journey to Meizhou Island to pay their respects.

Built upon her death in 987, the Mazu Ancestral Temple is the world's first dedicated to Mazu. Over the centuries, many other temples were built around the world, known as "spirit splits." These new temples obtain their spiritual power from Meizhou's temple. Through rituals, a newly sculpted statue of Mazu is granted divine power, making it a spiritual extension of the original. However, these "spirit split" statues must periodically return to Meizhou for rituals to recharge their spiritual strength.

Today, more than 10,000 Mazu temples from various dynasties remain preserved across over 50 countries and regions. For Mazu followers, the Meizhou Ancestral Temple is regarded as the "mother temple" of all spirit splits.

Mazu devotees participate in the "Mazu's Return to Her Ancestral Home" ceremony at the Mazu Ancestral Temple on Meizhou Island in Putian, Fujian Province, March 29, 2025 (Photo by Du Guodong)

From late January to late March, 438 Mazu cultural groups comprising more than 780,000 followers had gathered on Meizhou Island to pay tribute.

Mazu is also the first Chinese deity to be issued a national ID, allowing her statue to have rail and airline tickets booked through real-name systems while being transported for religious events. The practice is more culturally symbolic: A fusion of tradition and modernity, personifying Mazu in this way aims to strengthen believers' sense of belonging while revitalising traditional culture in a modern context.

The "Mazu's Return to Her Ancestral Home" event is an important part of the intangible cultural heritage of Mazu worship. Since 2008, Meizhou Ancestral Temple has hosted this grand event annually, with 2025 marking Mazu's 1,065th birthday. The celebration featured over a dozen intangible cultural heritage exhibits, including Mazu offerings, traditional Meizhou women's headwear and garments, model ship building and Mazu cake making at the Tianfei (Mazu) Hometown Ruins Park, located two kilometres from the temple. The wide range of displays attracted pilgrims and tourists alike, offering an immersive experience of Mazu culture.

As the birthplace of Mazu culture, Putian is actively developing to be a centre of Mazu culture, launching initiatives to preserve worship traditions and preparing for the 10th World Mazu Culture Forum, slated for December 2025.

Truth Be Told

In Putian, there's a saying: "We dare not lie in front of Mazu." It reflects the deep reverence and awe that local people feel towards the sea goddess, so much that some police stations in Putian have "Mazu Arbitration Rooms." At Licheng police station in Xianyou County, for example, one room has a statue of Mazu, creating a solemn, spiritual atmosphere. When neighbours or villagers are in a deadlocked dispute, both parties are invited into the room. The mediator begins by asking everyone to bow to Mazu before proceeding with the negotiation.

In one case, two neighbouring families nearly came to blows over a property boundary dispute. They brought the matter to the Mazu Arbitration Room, where both sides initially stood firm. But when the mediator asked, "Do you dare speak the truth in front of Mazu?" one man hesitated. Eventually, he admitted to having shifted the boundary marker slightly to expand his yard. Under Mazu's gaze, he acknowledged his wrongdoing and agreed to correct it. The families reconciled peacefully.

These rooms have proven highly effective in resolving conflicts, from family disagreements to land and labour disputes. The success rate is strikingly high, perhaps because participants fear not only the law, but also divine judgement.

Even the courts have found inspiration in this approach. In one civil case involving a loan, the plaintiff and defendant told conflicting stories, and there was no written contract or receipt. The judge, out of options, brought a Mazu statue into the courtroom and asked the defendant to swear the truth in front of her. The man began to sweat and was visibly shaken. After a long pause, he confessed to borrowing the money, saying he was not afraid of legal consequences, but feared Mazu's divine punishment.

In Putian, Mazu belief is a way of life. Temples big and small dot the city, each alive with incense smoke and whispered prayers. Every morning, worshippers arrive to bow, burn incense and pray for peace, good health and happiness. Some families even keep Mazu statues at home, making offerings in the morning and evening, especially during festivals.

Mazu devotees carry a Mazu statue during the "Mazu's Return to Her Ancestral Home" ceremony at the Mazu Ancestral Temple on Meizhou Island in Putian, Fujian Province, March 29, 2025 (Photo by Zhang Bin)

Yingge dancers perform during the "Mazu's Return to Her Ancestral Home" ceremony at the Mazu Ancestral Temple on Meizhou Island in Putian, Fujian Province, March 29, 2025 (Photo by Lü Ming)

And older generations are not alone in keeping traditions alive, as more young people in Putian are embracing Mazu culture.

Some find inspiration and comfort in joining the Mazu procession events on Meizhou Island. Others participate in cultural institutions or help organise folk festivals and religious exchanges, seeking ways to make Mazu traditions relevant in a modern world.

During this year's "Mazu's Return to Her Ancestral Home" celebration, young faces were everywhere, offering incense, performing in folk troupes and volunteering at events. Mazu Ancestral Temple on Meizhou Island now has over 30 staff members born after the year 2000.

Lin Jinzan, chairman of the temple's board of directors, said the temple will continue encouraging young believers to take the lead in preserving and promoting Mazu traditions.

Cultural Ties

The spread of Mazu culture has a long and far-reaching history. Originating in Putian, it gradually expanded along China's southeastern coast and followed Chinese migrants to communities around the world. Since the Song Dynasty (960-1279), as maritime trade flourished along the ancient Maritime Silk Road, Mazu worship travelled with merchants and sailors. Before setting sail, they prayed to Mazu, seeking her blessing for a safe voyage across treacherous seas. In the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), famed explorer Zheng He is said to have held grand ceremonies honouring Mazu before each of his seven expeditions (from 1405-1433) to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, rituals that believers say helped him avoid storms and navigate dangerous reefs.

Over time, Mazu worship came to represent more than maritime protection, becoming a powerful cultural symbol and spiritual support for coastal communities. Today, Mazu temples are central gathering places throughout southeastern China. On Mazu's birthday and ascension day (the ninth day of the ninth lunar month), grand temple fairs draw crowds for folk performances like dragon and lion dances, traditional opera and street processions.

On March 29, 2025, two statues of Mazu departed Xiamen Gaoqi International Airport on a six-day cultural exchange trip to Taiwan. Hundreds of years ago, immigrants from the Chinese mainland brought Mazu worship to Taiwan, where she came to be known as the Sea Goddess. Today, Taiwan is home to over 10 million believers and more than 800 temples are devoted to her.

Li Guoying, an executive with the Chinese Mazu Cultural Exchange Association, told *ChinaReport* that Mazu worship embodies shared values cherished on both sides of the Taiwan Strait and remains a vital thread of national identity. "It demonstrates remarkable cultural appeal and cohesive power, exerting a profound inspirational and guiding influence," he said. The shared heritage of Mazu fosters mutual understanding and a sense of kinship that transcends political divisions, he added.

A dark-faced Mazu statue at Jin'an Temple in Tainan, Taiwan (Photo by VCG)

Mazu statues are found across Fujian Province in white, gold and pink hues, colours said to reflect her divine aura. But one statue stands apart.

Legend has it that the famed black-faced Mazu of Meizhou Island was originally housed in Chaotian Pavilion inside Mazu Ancestral Temple. During its transfer to the Lugang Mazu Temple in Taiwan by ship, worshippers, worried about the statue being damaged by sea air, placed it inside the ship's cabin. While on the trip, incense offerings darkened its surface. Far from being seen as damaged, the soot-stained face came to symbolise Mazu's spiritual power and protective presence. This story contributed to the widespread development of Mazu culture, not just in Taiwan, but around the world.

Mazu is one of the most titled figures in Chinese history, having received 36 honourary titles from emperors over the centuries, including "Heavenly Consort" and "Heavenly Empress." Her worship spread not only through Fujian and Southeast China but across Southeast Asia, becoming one of the most enduring folk beliefs in the Chinese cultural sphere.

Beyond its spiritual function, Mazu culture serves as a cultural bridge connecting overseas Chinese communities. Temples dedicated to her can be found in Southeast Asia, Japan, South Korea, the US and other countries. In Malaysia, annual Mazu processions attract both believers and tourists. In Singapore, Thian Hock Keng is a prominent Mazu temple that serves both as a place of worship and a symbol of Chinese heritage.

Lin Ziying, chairman of Singapore's Hin Ann Thain Hiaw Keng, another important Mazu temple, recalled the procession in 2017, when a golden statue from Meizhou toured Singapore. "The streets were packed," he told *ChinaReport*, "and many elderly Chinese welcomed her with tears in their eyes, holding incense and candles." The emotional response, he said, captured how Mazu's presence resonates across generations and borders. "Our pilgrimage to Meizhou is not just about tradition," he added, "but a heartfelt return to our cultural roots."

In 2009, UNESCO added Mazuism to its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The designation recognises the richness of its rituals, legends, folk art and maritime traditions passed down through generations.

Today, Mazu culture serves as an invisible cultural bridge in the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, linking China with the rest of the world. It not only promotes economic and trade exchanges but also enhances cultural dialogue and mutual understanding.★

Qingzhou Statues

Time to Smile

Famous for their enigmatic smiles, Qingzhou's buried Buddhist sculptures at Longxing Temple unveil a thousand-year legacy of artistic mastery, religious devotion and cultural preservation

By Lü Weitao and Li Xintian

A Buddha statue from the Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577) is exhibited at Qingzhou Museum, Qingzhou, Shandong Province (Photo by VCG)

From January 19 to March 12, 2025, the Guardian Art Centre in Beijing held an art exhibition called "Seeing the Smile" featuring nearly 50 ancient Buddhist sculptures from Qingzhou and its surrounding area. A testimony to ancient Chinese sculpture art, the sculptures embody a unique artistic expression that has become known as the "Qingzhou Smile," with each sculpted face conveying a sense of warmth and serenity that transcends time.

Located 460 kilometres southeast of Beijing, in the central part of the Shandong Peninsula, lies the historic city of Qingzhou. Now a small county-level city, in ancient times the city held significant prominence. It was one of the "Nine Provinces" – ancient territorial divisions used in historical records that now symbolically represent China, with a history tracing back over 4,000 years. The name Qingzhou symbolises spring and represents wood in Five Elements theory, a central pillar of traditional Chinese medicine.

Historically, Qingzhou encompassed a vast area stretching from south of the Bohai Sea to north of Mount Tai, covering the Shandong Peninsula as well as parts of present-day Hebei Province. With its fertile soil, it was a political, economic and cultural hub in eastern China. However, as time passed, Qingzhou's significance diminished, reducing it to a small county town. Despite this, Qingzhou is home to a prestigious cultural institution – Qingzhou Museum, which ranks as a national first-class museum. That puts it on par with institutions such as the Palace Museum and the National Museum of China.

As the only county-level museum with such a high ranking, Qingzhou Museum boasts an extensive collection of over 50,000 cultural relics, including more than 3,000 precious artefacts. Among its most famous treasures are the so-called "Qingzhou Smiles," referring to the Buddhist sculptures unearthed from the ruins of Longxing Temple in Qingzhou. Characterised by their gentle and serene expressions with tranquil smiles, these statues reflect the distinctive Qingzhou style of Buddhist art.

Temple Trove

In October 1996, during the expansion of the sports field at Qingzhou No.8 Middle School, a bulldozer unearthed a hidden underground chamber. When they heard the news, Xia Mingcai and his team from Qingzhou Museum rushed to the site. As they removed the loose soil, stone statues were revealed. Xia, a renowned Chinese archaeologist who graduated from the Department of Archaeology at Peking University in 1966, quickly identified the statues as likely being Buddhist sculptures. Recognising the significance of the discovery, their preliminary investigation confirmed it was a Buddhist sculpture cache.

Qingzhou Museum immediately took measures to protect the site and sought approval to excavate from the State Administration of Cultural Heritage. Their efforts revealed an astonishing collection of exquisitely crafted Buddhist statues, leading to the subsequent discovery of Longxing Temple, a renowned Buddhist monastery dating from the Northern Qi (550-577) to the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

The underground chamber measured 8.7 metres from north to south and 6.8 metres from east to west, containing hundreds of Buddhist sculptures meticulously arranged. The statues, crafted from limestone, white marble, granite, pottery, iron, wood and clay, spanned various dynasties, from the Northern Wei (386-534) to the Northern Song (960-1127) dynasties. The largest statue stood 3.2 metres tall, while the smallest was only 20 centimetres. The sculptures were organised in three distinct layers, with woven mat imprints visible on the uppermost ones, alongside evidence of ceremonial burning. To the east of the chamber, they discovered a sloping pathway used to transport the statues to the burial site. These findings indicate that the statues were deliberately concealed.

More than 600 Buddhist sculptures, 142 coins and two ceramic vessels were unearthed. Further exploration revealed the southern section of the chamber contained the remains of large architectural structures, believed to be the ruins of Longxing Temple, originally built during the Southern Dynasties (420-589). The temple site extended 200 metres from north to south and 150 metres from east to west, preserving the authentic layout of a pre-Tang Buddhist monastery. The main hall foundation, measuring 30 metres in length and 25 metres in width, hinted at the temple's grand scale. Remarkably, Longxing Temple remains China's only large-scale Buddhist temple ruin dating prior to the Tang with a clear and well-preserved architectural layout.

Originally known as Nanyang Temple, it served as the principal monastery in Qingzhou, overseeing many surrounding temples. In 425, Liu Shanming, then governor of Beihai Commandery located within the modern-day Qingzhou region, donated his family residence to establish the temple. This marked the founding of what would later become Longxing Temple. Over the subsequent Northern Wei and Eastern Wei (534-550) periods, the temple expanded and prospered. By the Northern Qi Dynasty, it had grown into the largest and most revered temple in the eastern region, earning the title "The First Temple of the East."

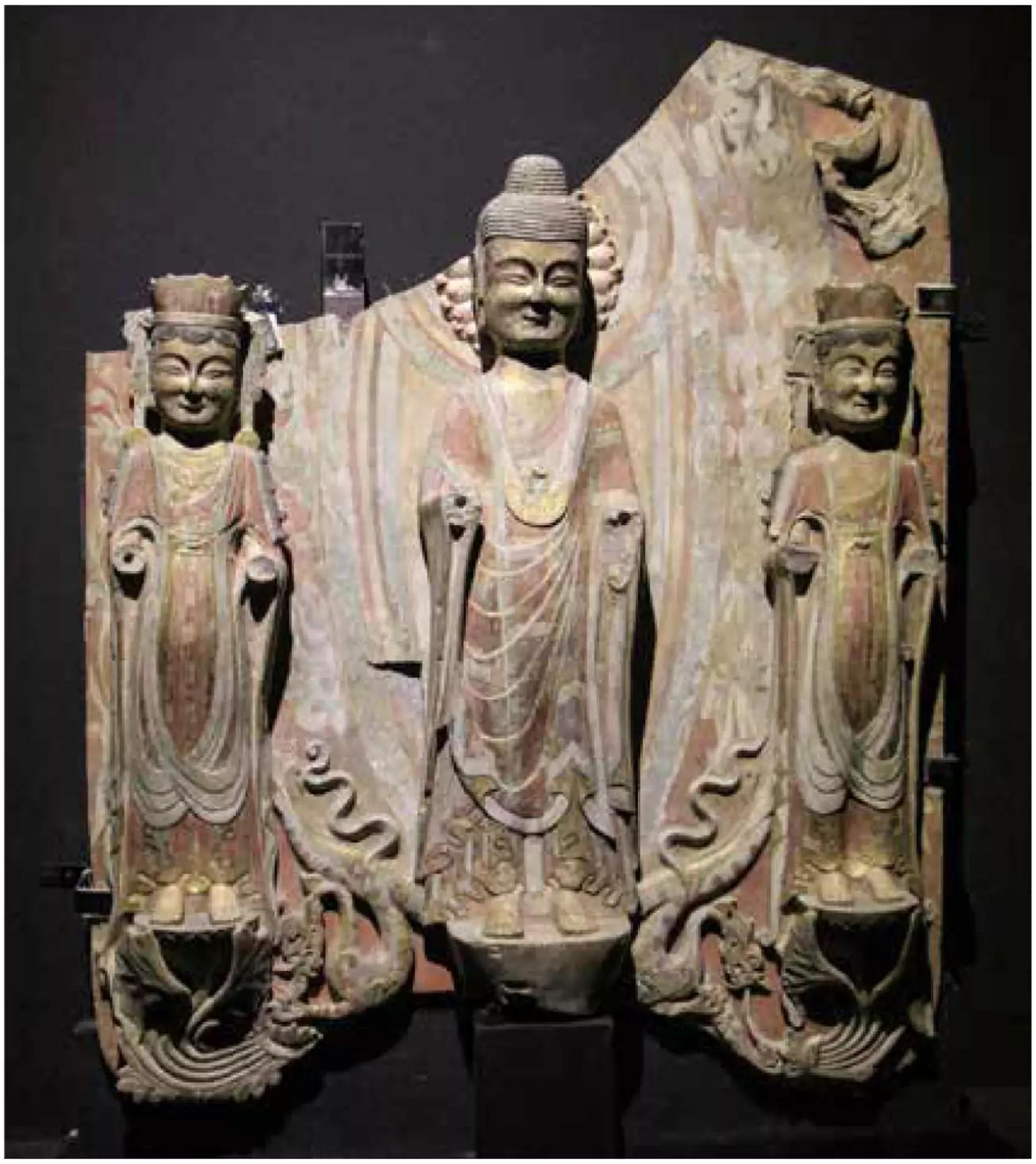
During the reign of Tang Empress Wu Zetian (690-705), it was renamed Dayun Temple. It was not until the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (713-741) that it was officially named Longxing Temple. However, during the transition between the Song and Jin dynasties (1125-1234), the temple gradually fell into ruin due to the ravages of war. In the Hongwu era of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1398), its remaining structures were dismantled to build the residence of Prince Qi. The once-glorious temple, with its nearly thousand-year history, was lost to time. It was only in 1996, with the discovery of the Buddhist statue cache, that Longxing Temple's mysteries were brought to light once again.

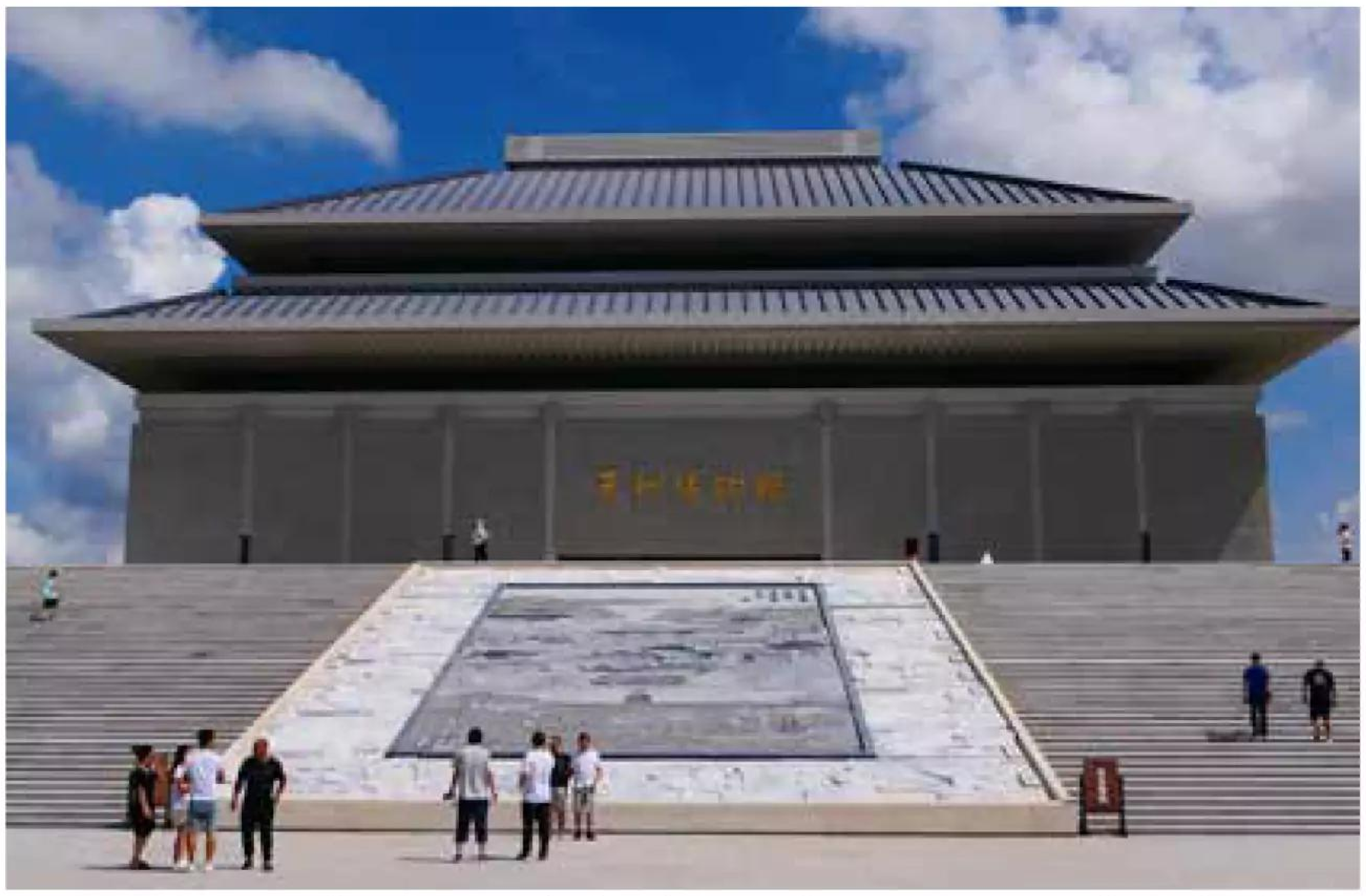
Buddhist Sculptures

The excavated Buddhist sculptures include stele carvings, Buddha statues, Bodhisattva statues, Arhat figures and donor portraits. About 200 statues have been reassembled and restored, 90 percent of which date back to the late Northern Wei, the earliest from the year of 529. However, most of the recovered statues are from the Eastern Wei and Northern Qi periods, with a smaller number from the Tang Dynasty. According to archaeological stratigraphy, the burial of the cache is believed to have occurred around or shortly after 1026, but certainly not earlier.

These Buddhist sculptures showcase exceptional craftsmanship, combining techniques such as round carving, bas-relief, high relief, openwork carving, line engraving, gilding and painting. The statues are characterised by diverse facial expressions and gestures, exuding elegance and grandeur.

One notable artistic feature is the intricate composition. Many sculptures are set against lotus-petal-shaped back screens, with the central Buddha figure in high relief accompanied by two Bodhisattvas or, in some cases, the Buddha alone. The upper parts of the screens often depict celestial beings flying





Top: A Buddhist triptych sculpture is displayed at Qingzhou Museum, Qingzhou, Shandong Province, October 31, 2013 (Photo by VCG)

Above: Qingzhou Museum, Qingzhou, Shandong Province, July 31, 2023 (Photo by VCG)

around pagodas, dragons or jeweled vases, while the lower sections feature coiling dragons with lotus flowers, leaves and buds in their mouths, which serve as bases for the Bodhisattvas. The background often incorporates shallow relief carvings or painted elements like halos, auras and flame motifs. This artistic approach skillfully condenses Buddhist narratives into limited space, evoking a vibrant and harmonious atmosphere.

When observing these Buddhist sculptures, it is evident that those from the Northern Wei period primarily follow the Central Plains style, characterised by solid and imposing features.

However, the distinct Qingzhou style began to emerge during the Eastern Wei. The large, elaborate back screens of the sculptures, featuring graceful curves, celestial beings and pagodas at the top, along with twin dragons coiling and soaring at the base, became a hallmark of this regional artistry.

By the Northern Qi, the characteristic style featuring an elegant skeleton and delicate features was replaced by a new aesthetic. The back-screen reliefs almost disappeared, giving way to standalone, round-sculpted figures. These sculptures often had full rounded faces, symbolising a shift in aesthetic preferences. Unlike the heavy, layered garments of the Northern Wei, Northern Qi sculptures displayed a completely different physical aesthetic. The clothing was thin and clung to the body, revealing the healthy and graceful curves of the figures.

A particularly remarkable aspect of these Buddhist sculptures is the preservation of their gilded and painted decorations. Previously, it was believed that Buddhist sculptures were plain and uncoloured. However, the gilding, which was applied to exposed skin areas of the Buddha, also adorned decorative patterns and ornaments. The use of vibrant pigments was even more extensive. Colours from cinnabar, azurite, ochre and malachite green were applied to clothing, patterns and narrative scenes illustrating the Buddha's story. The seamless integration of painting and sculpture created a layered and dynamic visual effect, heightening the sanctity and grandeur of the Buddha and Bodhisattva figures.

The sheer number of sculptures unearthed from the Longxing Temple site, their exceptional craftsmanship, the well-preserved gilding and painted details and the extensive chronological span they cover make this discovery unparalleled. It immediately drew international attention and was recognised as one of China's Top 10 Archaeological Discoveries of the year 1996 by the country's National Cultural Heritage Administration. It was also ranked 84th among the 100 Major Archaeological Discoveries of the 20th Century by the Institute of Archaeology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2001.

Due to their strong regional characteristics and unique artistic style, these sculptures have been widely recognised by scholars as representing the Qingzhou style and are celebrated for the serene and gentle expressions known as the Qingzhou Smile.

Today, these enigmatic Buddhist sculptures are the crown jewels of Qingzhou Museum. They have been exhibited in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong, as well as in countries such as the US, Germany, Switzerland, Japan and the UK. Rightly regarded as the "Buddhist statues that have travelled the farthest in the world," they continue to captivate audiences across the globe.

Research on the collection is ongoing. While scholars generally agree on the dating and stylistic characteristics, there are differing opinions regarding the statues' origins and the timing of their burial. Some researchers believe that judging from the diversity of styles and inscriptions, the sculptures could not all have originated from Longxing Temple, as a single temple would not typically house such a wide variety of sizes and designs. Instead, the statues are likely to have come from multiple temples across Qingzhou, with Longxing Temple serving as a primary site.

Moreover, it is suggested that the burial of these sculptures was not a one-time event. Instead, it may have been a continuous practice carried out over several periods. This theory is supported by evidence indicating that the statues were interred at different times.

The question of why these Buddhist sculptures were buried underground remains a mystery. Initially, archaeologists speculated the burial might be linked to periods of war or religious persecution, particularly during major campaigns to persecute Buddhists during the 5th to 10th centuries by four Chinese emperors.

In times of turmoil, devout monks, driven by a desire to protect sacred relics, may have secretly buried the damaged statues to shield them from complete destruction.

However, recent archaeological findings provide an alternative interpretation.

Near the Longxing Temple site, researchers unearthed a well-preserved stone stele with a clear inscription. This discovery suggests that during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1126), Longxing Temple frequently held grand Buddhist ceremonies.

As part of these religious observances, monks believed that burying damaged statues from previous dynasties was a meritorious act that could accumulate spiritual virtue and promote the Buddhist faith. Collecting and respectfully burying these damaged sculptures became a symbolic gesture of reverence and devotion.

Thanks to the compassionate efforts of these monks, the enchanting Qingzhou Smiles have endured for over a millennium, allowing us today to appreciate their timeless beauty and serenity.★

NEWS CHINA
THE CONTEXT

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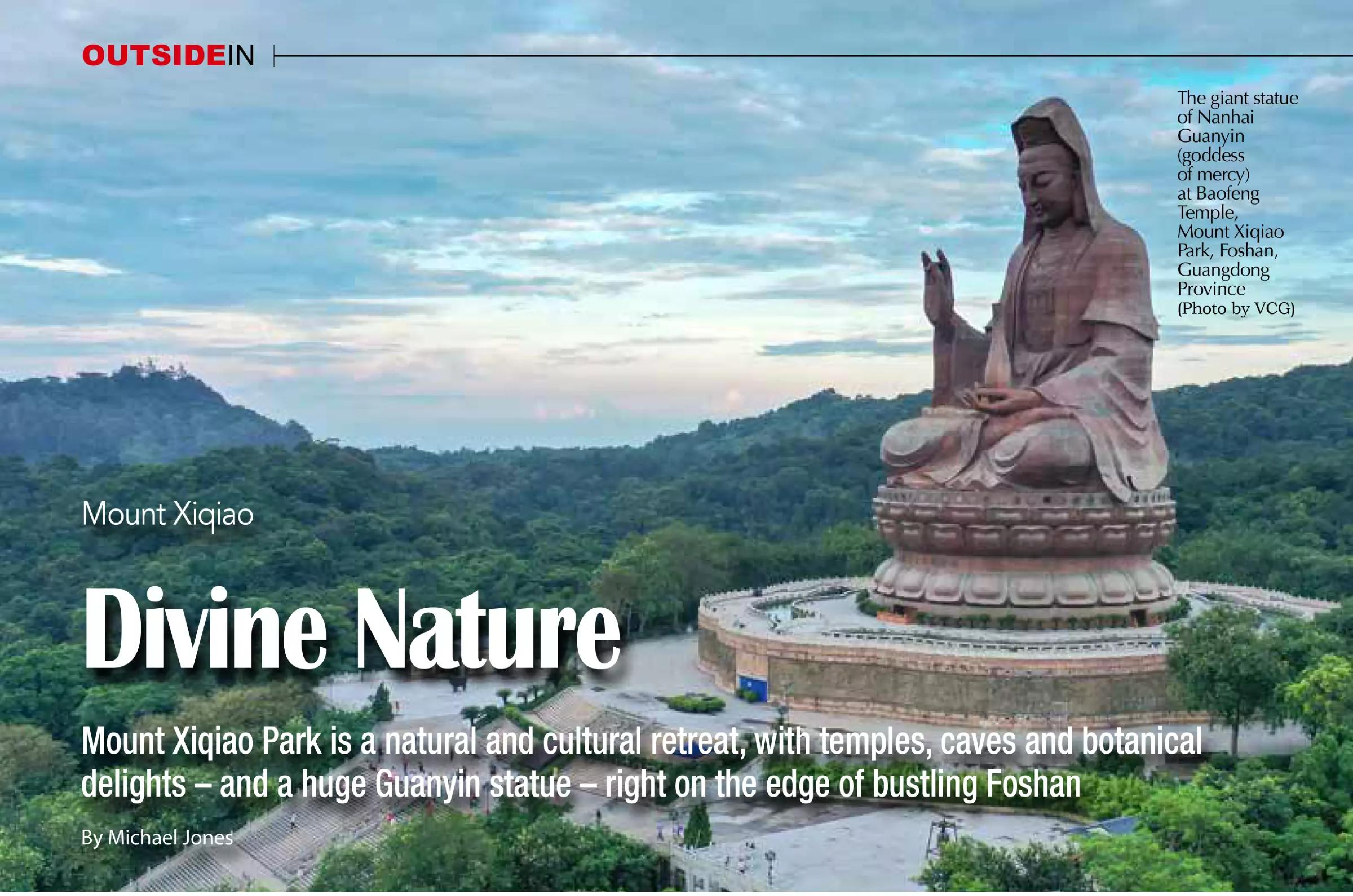


The giant statue of Nanhai Guanyin (goddess of mercy) at Baofeng Temple, Mount Xiqiao Park, Foshan, Guangdong Province (Photo by VCG)

Mount Xiqiao

Divine Nature

Mount Xiqiao Park is a natural and cultural retreat, with temples, caves and botanical delights – and a huge Guanyin statue – right on the edge of bustling Foshan

By Michael Jones

Xiqiao Shan (Mount Xiqiao) in Foshan, Guangdong Province is an aural paradise. While our modern world often feels overwhelmed by the din of electronic appliances, the air around Mount Xiqiao is filled with the distinct and mesmerising sound of fresh running water. This is hardly surprising considering the locals boast the scenic area contains 232 springs and 28 waterfalls. The dense tropical forests covering the mountain are home to abundant wildlife, with birdlife presenting an endless chorus of soothing melodies, while insects chirp enthusiastically. Away from the access roads, with their quiet buzz of electric tourist vehicles, the only man-made sounds come from the occasional distant gong of a temple's sacred bell. How different the sounds must have been 50 million years ago, when Mount Xiqiao was still spewing lava and ejecting molten rocks into the atmosphere.

Mount Xiqiao has been designated as a national forest park and a national geological park. Although the park is typically referred to as being a singular mountain, it contains an abundance of mountain peaks and forest areas. Not all these different areas are as tranquil as each other, and some are very popular with tourists. However, the variety of attractions at Mount Xiqiao are part of the charm. Indeed, they ensure that visitors have reason to spend multiple days visiting the area, alternating between areas of fascinating culture and areas of organic serenity. You can visit any time of year. However, due to extensive walking required it is recommended to avoid periods of extreme heat, or times when storms are likely.

Golden Guanyin

The most famous attraction is Nanhai Guanyin Culture Park, which contains a monumental 66-metre-high statue of Guanyin, known as the goddess of mercy. This statue sits atop one of the area's many peaks, and on a clear day offers an incredible vista across much of southern China's Greater Bay Area. The statue sits above a curious hall of religious idolatry and art, much of it painted with lurid, yet appealing colours, or smothered in glittering gold. To reach the Guanyin, visitors need to ascend through Baofeng Temple. The temple is built over multiple terraces and contains numerous devotional halls containing statues of deities and other revered figures. Despite the popularity of the temple, its immense scale ensures that visitors can find their own space to contemplate, or indeed worship, in peace. The combined area of Baofeng Temple and the Nanhai Guanyin Culture Park is easily enough for any visitor to enjoy two to three hours. It also includes ascending a fair number of steps. For that reason, visitors may not wish to arrive at the temple having already hiked their way up the mountain. Many therefore choose to take advantage of the affordable shuttle bus, which brings people to the temple entrance.

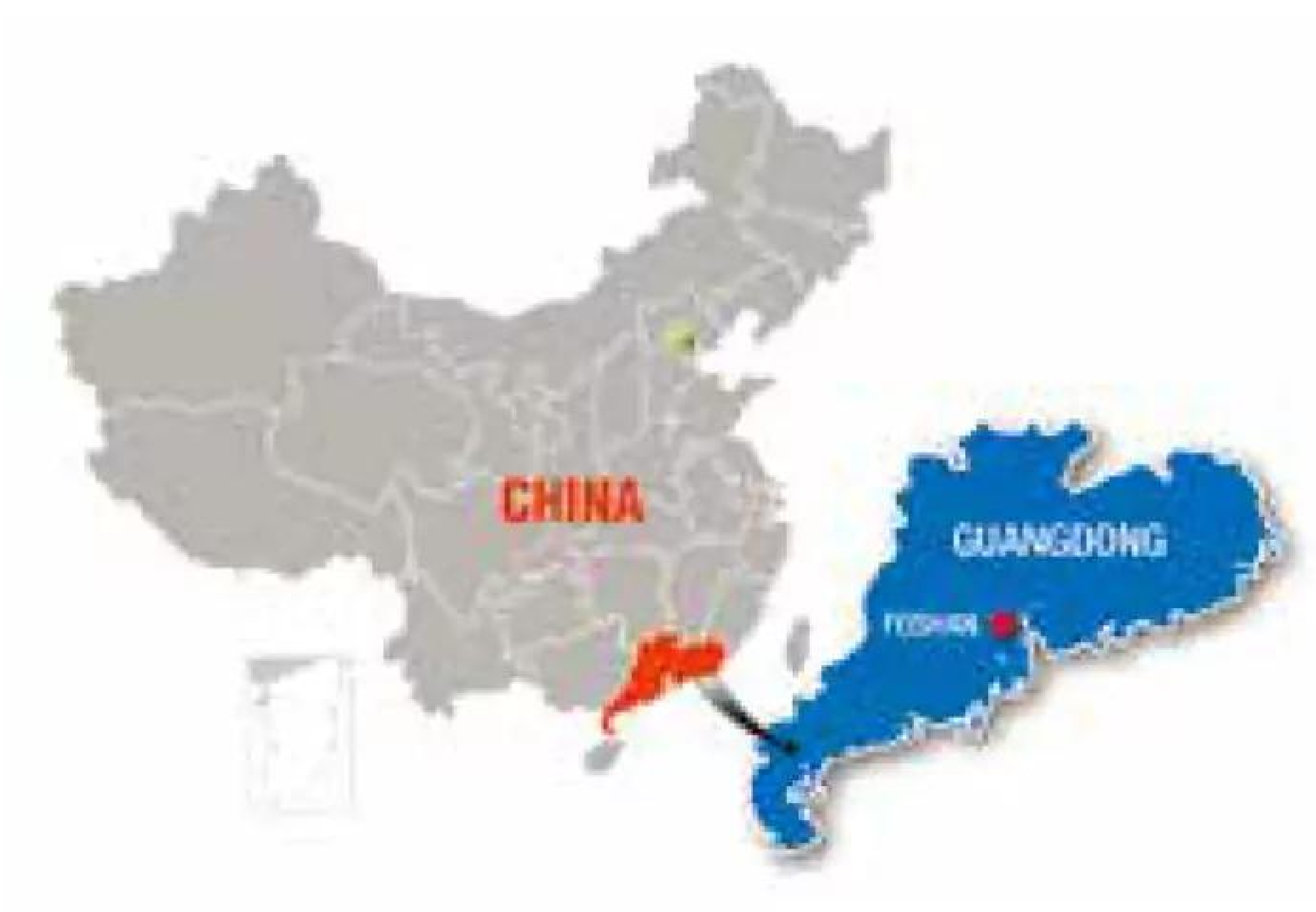
For visitors who seek authenticity or are fascinated by the more traditional elements of Chinese culture, the entrance to Baofeng Temple sits next to a tiny, ancient, but still inhabited mountain village. The village can be accessed by a tiny pathway to the right of the temple's main visitor entrance. Considering the immense throng of visitors that explores the temple and ascends to meet Guanyin, almost no-one seems to visit the adjacent village. However, the locals are friendly and are very happy to sell basic supplies to those who venture in. Indeed, there is something strikingly poetic about the juxtaposition between a Guanyin taller than the Statue of Liberty, golden shrines and Buddhas, and the modest reality of this humble village.

Natural History

The area has other opportunities to entice those who are particularly interested in culture and history. For example, close to Mount Xiqiao is the village of Song Tang, which can trace its origins back over 800 years. Despite being a relatively small settlement, Song Tang contains a large number of ancestral halls as well as family temples and family schools. Another cultural attraction is Luzhou Village, with its Huang Fei-hong Lion Dance and Martial Arts Academy, which has a fascinating history.

However, for most visitors to Mount Xiqiao, the primary draw is nature. The volcanic history of the mountains ensures that the area is as rich in geological curiosity as it is rich in botanical diversity. The geological importance of this area is not new to modern civilisation, as evidenced by the ancient quarry that sits in the heart of the magnificent Shiyan Cavern. However, the most popular geological feature is Baiyun Cave. In addition to the "three cave paradises" that make up Baiyun Cave, the area includes features such as Kuiguang Tower, built by wealthy local families in the late 18th century to encourage the community's youth to perform better in imperial examinations, and Dashing Torrent Waterfall, otherwise known as the Xiqiao Cloud Waterfall.

Stone gate at Mount Xiqiao Park (Photo by Michael Jones)



Another attractive area to visit within the Mount Xiqiao range is the Nine Dragons Cavern, an area of plunging valleys that features dramatic geological formations including caves that seem destined for a Gothic drama. In addition to the caves, the valleys around the Nine Dragons Cavern include a biodiverse selection of flora and fauna. In many areas, the human impact has been minimised, and nature has been allowed to take its course, resulting in a dense jungle atmosphere, where all creatures great and small can scurry about their daily business, free from the dangers that humans pose them.

Dotted across Mount Xiqiao is also a fabulous assortment of semi-wild scenic zones, where specific plant species have been introduced or cultivated over the centuries. Many of these areas trace their history back hundreds of years, again highlighting the importance of Mount Xiqiao to the history of Southern China. Some of the most important scenic zones to visit include the Peach Garden with its romantic blossoms, the Sweet-Scented Osmanthus Garden with its aromatic trees, the Rhododendron Garden featuring over 100 varieties of fragrant rhododendron, the Sifang Bamboo Garden featuring an eponymous species of bamboo unique to the mountain, and the Camellia Garden blessed with over 50 species of gorgeous camellias.

Finally, it would be a real shame to visit Mount Xiqiao without taking a relaxing stroll around Tianhu Lake. This former ancient crater offers a beautiful respite from modern life, with the energising ions from the water combining with the fresh oxygen from the forest to rejuvenate even the weariest traveller. With peaceful wooden walkways, and carefully positioned viewpoints, it is no wonder that people have fallen in love with this area repeatedly over the centuries, and why Guanyin herself feels so at home. ★

Practicalities

Visiting Nanhai Guanyin Culture Park and much of the Mount Xiqiao area is currently free of charge. However, internal tourist buses are charged and may be necessary for some visitors.

Getting there: From Foshan, bus routes 227, 226 and the Xiqiao Express stop at the North Transportation Hub near the North Gate. Alternatively take Foshan Metro Line 2 to Nanzhuang Station, then walk to Nanzhuang Cultural Centre Station to transfer to bus 226.

Fruity Fun in the Sun

By Sam Duckett

This month, work has whisked me away to sun-kissed Hainan Province, or more specifically, the World of Tropical Fruits Garden in the coastal city of Qionghai. Picture a park-like setting, perfect for a leisurely stroll in the sun, filled to the brim with bizarre and delightful fruits like rainbow bananas and chocolate pudding fruits. As I turned every corner, I couldn't help but think, "That has got to be fake!" But as I explored deeper into this tropical wonderland – also known as "China's Tropical Fruit Gene Bank" – I quickly realised that everything here was as real as my childhood dream of one day going to Willy Wonka's chocolate factory.

Now, being a Brit it doesn't take much to impress me in the fruit department. Growing up, my fruit selection was basically apples, grapes, oranges and bananas. Exotic fruits like blueberries were the height of sophistication in my neck of the woods. So when I first moved to Beijing and discovered a world of durians, dragon fruit and pomelos, my mind was already blown. It wasn't until I returned to the UK for a summer holiday and couldn't find my newfound favourites that I realised just how limited my previous selection was. Coincidentally, since moving to China and trading my traditional bag of potato chips for sweet and sour mangosteen, I have also lost quite a bit of weight around my midsection. Fast-forward to the present day and I am raring to go now that I have the opportunity to further expand my palate.

So, what fun fruits did this Englishman uncover? Upon entering the garden's intriguing fruit section, the first to catch my eye was the "milk fruit," which is called "cow's milk fruit" in Chinese. At first, my brain struggled to accept the concept of dairy and fruit being one singular, edible entity. With the texture of an orange and a subtle hint of milk, I immediately wanted to know if I could find it online to add to my weekly shopping list.

> Next up was the red honey phoenix pineapple and the white cocoa beans. They both had flavours similar to the classics, but I was all about those vibrant new colours

And this was just the beginning of my fruit-tasting journey. Next up was the red honey phoenix pineapple and white cocoa beans. They both had flavours similar to the classics, but I was all about those vibrant new colours. This experience really drove home something I've always believed: we're living in a time where the fruit combo possibilities are endless. Chocolate apples? Yes, please! Caramel strawberries? Count me in! Rainbow pears? I can't wait to taste the rainbow!

When lunchtime rolled around, I decided to check out the garden's restaurant, where every dish made use of tropical fruits. It was a mixed bag – sweet and sour fish with papaya? A total win. But dragon fruit fried rice? Let's just say it looked fabulously purple but tasted like, well, regular fried rice, which was a wee bit disappointing after such an exciting day. However, I'm nothing if not a child at heart, so give me colourful food any day!

After lunch, I tried my hand at a chocolate-making workshop. You might be asking, "What on earth does chocolate have to do with fruit?" But as it turns out, chocolate starts off as cocoa beans, which are, drumroll please… a fruit! I guess this means that next time I indulge in a Mars bar from 7/11, I can confidently tell my mum I'm upping my fruit intake.

Making my own chocolate turned out to be a delightful experience, and it is far simpler than I could have ever imagined. The process really only entailed mixing and grinding cocoa beans, powdered milk, red sugar and butter. I had always imagined that the wonders of chocolate could only be created through the latest high-tech machinery, but you live and learn. Now that I have uncovered the secret to making it, I think that whipping up some natural chocolate bars would be the perfect Saturday afternoon activity to do with my daughter.

All in all, this latest chapter in my fruit discovery journey has in some ways been emblematic of my time in China. As I sip on a coconut and wrap up this article, I'm reminded that travel truly does broaden our horizons, and I guess my ever-expanding palate probably reflects my own growth during my time here. I'll ponder that thought as I tuck into the delight that is an Australian finger lime.★

Groceries, Gouda and Guilty Pleasures

By Leila Hashemi

As someone who considers myself a bit of a cook, I was super intimidated when I first arrived in China. Heading to the local markets, I was confronted with strange ingredients, different presentation styles, and of course, language barriers. The first real shop, if you can even call it that, was an open-air market right outside my neighbourhood. I was thrilled to come home with two huge bags of veggies, some eggs, meat and even a few snacks for less than US$15.

But I did have my qualms. It just wasn't something I was used to. I had questions about things, but I knew I had a budget, so I didn't question it too much. Additionally, there was a bit of a learning curve when it came to communication, thank goodness for that little calculator and computer in our pockets our teachers said we wouldn't have.

Looking back now, I really wish I had utilised that market more. I went by one day a few years ago, and it was long gone.

And even though prices in China are much cheaper than the American standard, even at the foreign shops, I had quite literally been clicking my money away

I'll never forget the first time I found a foreign grocery store. I'm pretty sure I actually felt my jaw drop when the person in front of me spent 600 yuan (US$82) on just a few items. I thought to myself, "Woah, I won't ever be able to do that."

Fast forward… and well, I did become that person. I saw the numbers flash on the cash register screen and then on my Alipay transaction notification as I spent around US$95 on a handful of things at a French shop complete with treats from the US.

I soon became addicted to the luxurious cheeses and familiar items from back home that made my life seem easier, but my pockets much, much lighter. I can't even explain to you the joy I felt when I saw a can of premade enchilada sauce (sad, I know).

But I started realising I was getting too comfortable. Instead of enjoying the experience of going into stores, I would simply order everything online – which is admittedly one of my absolute favourite China conveniences. However, the detachment, ease of ordering, and not having to lug the bags home yourself, made it the ideal shopping mode for me.

Suddenly I found myself adding to my online grocery cart with the purchasing power of someone with a black Amex card… which I surely do not.

At one point, I realised it had probably been over a year since I'd stepped into a grocery store to shop. However, all that changed with a simple trip to a local grocer with a friend.

And even though prices in China are much cheaper than the American standard, even at the foreign shops, I realised walking into that store that I had quite literally been clicking my money away. The 20 yuan (US$3) peppers were now 5 (US$0.70) , and the 40 yuan chicken (US$5) was less than half the price. Nicely packaged, fresh and with none of the issues I had built up in my head. Then my friend did me the ultimate favour and showed me how to find shops like that on my Chinese grocery apps, and I haven't looked back.

Don't get me wrong – I still get my salt and vinegar chips and other nostalgic snacks from the foreign stores. But the bulk of what I buy now is from Chinese grocers. I wish I could say I now frequent grocery stores more often, but old habits die hard. I still order most of my groceries off the apps, but I also enjoy an impromptu trip to Beijing's Sanyuanli wet market to get some quality meat, the feel of the market and discover things outside my regular shopping list. Did you know it's not that hard to make your own enchilada sauce? Well, I do now. I even took a cooking class that introduced me to Chinese ingredients I would have never thought to buy. Now they're staples in my pantry.

Convenience is king, but don't convenience yourself out of your pocket money. The greatest thing is that you can spend as much or as little as you like without truly ever breaking the bank. And honestly? After getting hit with sticker shock every time I visit home, I've come to appreciate having fewer choices. Do we really need two aisles of top-to-bottom salad dressing? ★

Pie Hard: The Beijing Snack That's Nailed It

By Mina Yan

China has no shortage of meat-stuffed buns and pies in its culinary arsenal. If you've ever been to a dim sum restaurant, you know exactly how many different types of delicious treats you can attempt to stuff into your mouth in one sitting (while putting the elasticity of your waistband to the test). From the globally famous *xiaolongbao* of Shanghai to the gigantic, face-sized buns of Shandong, it seems like each region has its own meat-stuffed speciality.

Beijing's is called the doornail meat pie, or *mending roubing* (门钉肉饼). It gets its name from its unique shape, which resembles the round-headed brass studs still found on doors in the city's historic hutongs.

The actual doornails hold both historical and architectural significance. The large doors of residences were often made of several planks backed with horizontal braces and reinforced with nails. To mask the nails, brass studs were added for safety and as a decorative element. During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the number of doornail studs became a status symbol.

In China, the number nine represents the greatest and most noble, so of course it was reserved for the emperor. Only important gates that the emperor would pass through in the Forbidden City (now the Palace Museum) were allowed to have nine doornails down and across in a grid pattern, totalling 81. All other residences of princes, nobles and officials had at most eight across and nine down.

Now back to our meat pie. Its resemblance to these rotund studs sets it apart from other snacks, and their popularity in small, local hutong restaurants adds another layer of charm, history and authenticity. They're smaller and thicker than other pies, but the huge serving of meat inside makes them nice and juicy with every bite.

But for first-timers, these snacks come with a warning. The first time I tried one, my confused expression must've outed me as a rookie, because our waiter reminded me – twice – that doornail pies are scalding hot. And boy, was he right.

What makes them so delicious (and dangerous) is the filling – a savoury mix of pork and scallions – enhanced by a generous splash of sesame oil. That sesame oil brings the flavour to life, but it's also the culprit behind the hidden heat. Proper Beijing doornail pies are fried on an oiled skillet and cooked until golden and crisp on the outside. But while the exterior might look cool enough to handle, the filling holds its heat. Bite into one too fast, and you'll get a mouthful of molten sesame oil that can leave your tongue scorched.

Still, the risks are worth it. Just remember to take a small bite first, let some of the steam and oil escape, and then you're in for a real treat.

Doornail meat pies are beloved by longtime Beijingers. They're a staple breakfast item found at stalls in the city's winding hutongs. These days, while locals grab them as part of their morning routine, tourists seek them out for a true bite of Beijing culture. Like snapping a photo in front of the city's historical architectural marvels, trying a doornail meat pie should be on your Beijing bucket list. It's the edible version of the perfect holiday selfie.★

REALCHINESE

xiǎo hái gē jiě

小孩哥 / 姐

xiaohai ge/xiaohai jie

Big brother-kid / Big sister-kid

China's State-run Xinhua News Agency recently shared a video on its Douyin account showing two boys, around seven or eight years old, engaging in a friendly dance battle. Viewers applauded their energy and impressive moves, joking that even children can be "big brother-kids" and "big sister-kids" to the online community at large.

With *xiaohai* meaning "kid" and *ge* meaning "big brother," the term has become a kind of informal honourific. The same goes for girls, with *jie* replacing *ge* to mean "big sister." They're used to describe children who display extraordinary talent or maturity beyond their years.

For instance, State-media outlet *Global Times* in early April used the term to describe a group of primary school students in Tianjin who extinguished a fire in an open area before firefighters arrived. When a firefighter later offered to reward them, one of the boys unexpectedly replied, "Just don't give us any exercises to do."

Netizens joked that this *xiaohai ge* wasn't just brave and quick-thinking, he was calm enough to predict what kind of reward might really be in store.

Children like these often go viral. Some possess remarkable skills from painting to kung fu, while others reflect on life with surprising depth, like pint-sized philosophers. Amused (and maybe a bit humbled), some adult netizens have commented that kids like these make them feel a bit worthless by comparison.★

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